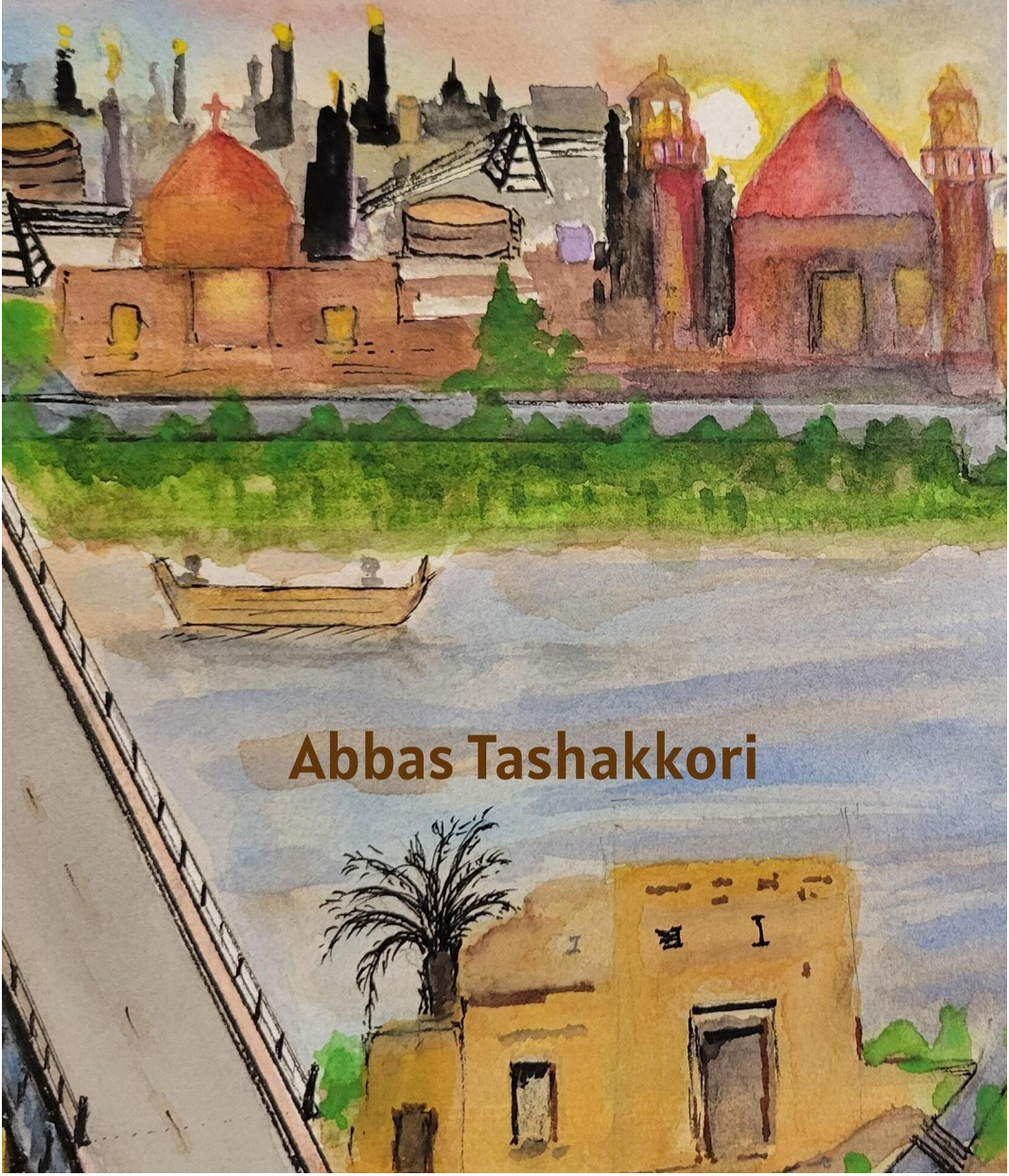
The Good Side of the River:

Stories of Tradition, Social Change, and Cultural Adaptation

Second Edition



Abbas Tashakkori

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We are all immigrants from the past, and home lives inside the memory, where we lock it up and pretend it is unchanged

Dina Nayeri, The Ungrateful Refugee

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1

Preface

Over three years ago, while working on the first edition of this book during the height of the COVID-19 lockdown, I suddenly remembered an old Persian song I hadn't heard in over fifty years. It was just a vague memory of something important for what I was doing, but I couldn't decide why, or remember the singer's name. The only thing I could remember was that it was a sad love song consoling a hopeless person to accept fate, given the futility of the odds.

It took some time, but when I eventually located a copy online[1], I found what had haunted me for months. It was parts of the lyrics that roughly translate as follows:

"What do you expect,
From a pebble in a vast expanse of rocks?
From a bird trapped in a cage?
From a gentle stream[2] encountering a sea?
What do you expect?
Come on! What do you expect?"

Listening to RoohParvar's captivating voice brought back the sense of dread and hopelessness that the song once created in me when I was a teenager. I have felt like that pebble many times in my distant past, keenly aware of the hopelessness of the odds against me and people like me.

I must confess that for years, every so often, I continued asking myself the question that the hopeless song asked: *Come on! What do you expect?* What could I expect? There was comfort in accepting my place in the world, the culture, and the social system that provided the loving and supportive community to which I belonged. Wasn't that comfort enough? Each time, the uncertain answer was *no*, leading me to seek alternatives by trying harder, even recklessly, regardless of the odds.

More than half a century later, I tried to express that answer in a watercolor painting in an arts class that I had started when I retired. When I explained to the group the idea behind my (admittedly amateurish) painting, everyone provided feedback. Linda, a brilliant artist in the group, saw an answer in the painting that I had not seen clearly myself: "Expect to create life and beauty, to go around the obstacles, to *become* the sea, not to confront it." She added later that "I'd bet you have already done that in your life!"

I have thought about that statement often since then. Have I done that? What did my life look like when I was a child born in poverty in an ancient culture that was waking up to modernity and post-WWII socio-political challenges? How did my world change to what it is today? Have I been able to become a part of the sea, rather than confront it?

Until then, there had been a nagging voice in the back of my head telling me to write about that

old world and the details of the journey from it to the present. The song and the follow-up thoughts changed that nudging voice to a raging tyrant shouting, *The stories must be told! But why?* I often asked, uncertainly looking for answers.

Almost three decades ago, a Mexican migrant who worked in a corporate tomato farm not far from the place where I lived in Florida asked me if I needed his son, a junior in high school, to help me with yard work. He told me that he was trying to keep his son away from seasonal work on tomato farms, hoping that he would finish high school and get a "steady job." Over time, I had opportunities to chat with his son. He told me more than once that he wanted to go to college when he finished high school, but he knew there was little or no chance of achieving that. At the time, I could hear my teenage self in his voice, and I told him so while I shared bits and pieces of my own life story to encourage him. I never saw him or heard from him again after I had to move away in response to my own life crises. However, I have found him many times over in similar stories of other young individuals I have known in the past few decades, including my siblings. Perhaps more than all of them, when I recently found and listened to RoohParver's song again, I immediately remembered the despair in that young man's voice.

The old song wove these stories into a tapestry that echoed my voices of the distant past, drenched in uncertainty, despair, and hope. With that interconnection came a clearer answer to the question I asked above: Why should I write these stories? My lingering hesitation about writing this book, more so about making it public, would not wane. *I am not a millionaire, a famous politician, or a baseball champion*, I told myself. *Why would anyone be interested in reading my life stories?*

What broke the debilitating chain was the clarity that came when I responded to my own question. It included a hope that telling these stories might encourage the young people who are discouraged because they are facing the doubts of my past, or comfort the older ones who have traveled similar paths with few opportunities to tell their own stories. Like me, these older travelers not only have had accomplishments to be proud of, but also incurred scars to identify and tend to. The scars are the costs of breaking the boundaries of poverty and hopelessness, traveling across cultures, geographies, and time periods. Dreaming about the other side's material and psychological modernity, many in this group have crossed the symbolic river (that the name of this book is based on), leaving the comforts of tradition, familiarity, and tightly woven communities behind in their search for new opportunities.

Like me, for this older group of individuals, especially immigrants, crossing that symbolic river (or sea) has been highly stressful, often riddled with guilt for sacrificing the old to attain the new. Despite many accomplishments, there have been emotional and psychological costs in my own journey. I am the face of that older group, who may or may not be aware of their own costs. Hopefully, in my stories, they will find the comfort of understanding the scars and healing them, also recognizing that they are not alone in these feelings and experiences.

I certainly have not been alone in my efforts to write this book. Many have encouraged it and provided feedback. Among them, I am especially grateful to my friends, professors Isabel Valiela-Daveny of Gettysburg College and Akbar Aghajanian of the University of North Carolina at Fayetteville, who generously offered their time to read an early draft and provided feedback. Ms. Sophia Dembling's editorial review and suggestions were valuable in shaping an early draft. Undoubtedly, writing in my second language, I have made linguistic or stylistic errors in my latter revisions that neither of them would have accepted. I apologize for that.

My son Cyrus has been a major driving force behind writing this book. I am grateful for his

encouragement, and that of my daughters Mitra and Ariana. Compensating for my memory lapses, my siblings have graciously helped me complete some of the old stories, and encouraged me to write them. I have been blessed with their kindness and love! I am also grateful to Ms. Maria Lockard and Reverend Patrick Web for reading and providing general feedback on an early draft.

Stories are always impacted by the selective memories and interpretations of the storytellers. This is even more true if they are written decades later, in contexts far removed from where they occurred. Since this book is a collection of such stories, I am wary of possible memory issues, despite my efforts to be as objective as humanly possible in my reporting.

Throughout this book, I have tried to remain loyal to my storytelling role, refraining from making social-psychological analyses that my professional role might dictate. The readers who provided feedback on earlier drafts did not agree with each other on this. Some encouraged more extensive analysis, especially through an immigrant's eyes, while others suggested keeping the analytic comments to a minimum. I have tried to keep such explicit analysis to a minimum, at least until the last chapter, in which I ask and try to answer a few existential questions, also sharing my personal and/or psychological/philosophical reflections about the journey. If you choose to read it, I hope you find these reflections useful in your self-exploration journeys. I would also appreciate it if you shared your own thoughts with me via email (Tashakkori.Author@Gmail.com).

2

Prologue

The Angry River

I am walking on the side of the bridge, gazing at the river running lazily underneath, oblivious to the sounds of passing cars. It is a cool evening in the fall. The river is beautiful at dusk. The water is clean and almost clear, a light shade of mud reflecting a darkening blue sky. It is high tide, and the water is moving slowly, covered by a thin blanket of fog that is unusual for this time of day. *The river looks like a gentle giant still trying to wake up*, I tell myself with a smile. As I get farther from the riverbank behind me, the pungent smell of smoke from burning water buffalo dung gradually gives way to a cool and refreshing breeze.

I have been here many times at high tide, often wishing I could jump in that peaceful and clean water for a swim. On both sides of the river, a tall line of date palms is skirted by walls of green bamboo, partly immersed in water, that appear impenetrable. Looking to my left and the horizon, I can barely see the river's bend disappearing in the unending silhouettes of trees.

Behind me, on *my* side of the river, hidden among the tall date palms, lies the security of home and the unconditional love of my family. It is where I lie down to sleep under the blanket of the vast Milky Way at night, getting lost in its beauty, a trail of shiny dust that covers the entire sky. Nothing can spoil its beauty, not even the smell of chemicals released into the air nightly by the sprawling oil refinery on the city side of the river, or the tiny black balls of soot that the wind carries from it. I love the tall hibiscus trees on my side of the river, and the dense canna lilies that have spread among them. I love to listen to the sound of birds perched on the layers of green canopy overhead and the deafening chirrup of crickets at night.

These memories momentarily eclipse the harsh realities of living on my side: poverty and hardship—my realities. I am walking away from mud houses that shelter migrant families struggling to survive, and the native Arab tribes living in old huts alongside their water buffaloes, tending to the lush and green okra and tomato farms that look like islands in a sea of date palms. On my side of the river, the landscape is crisscrossed by deep canals like veins that connect them to the ever-present body of the river. One can walk along the narrow dusty lanes that don't end anywhere, caged by mud walls of the houses that seem to be bending under the weight of time. You can easily get lost in the abyss of darkness at night if not for the lingering light of your kerosene lantern. In the daytime, you can bask in the joy of children playing in the dusty lanes, often barefoot, with little care in the world, not even for their own hunger. That is MY place! It is where I and other nine-year-old children like me can freely daydream about toys, playgrounds, and as much ice cream as our hearts desire.

As I walk on the long bridge, away from that side, I can see the streetlights and the headlights

of cars and buses on the other side of the river, far away from it. Even further, on the horizon, I see the dancing lights of burning gas on the top of the tall columns of the refinery that stretches as far as I can see.

I know a lot about life on that side of the river as well. On that side, children don't have to do their homework next to kerosene lanterns at night. People get water out of pipes—water that is clean and maybe cool every time they turn on the faucets. In the evenings, children watch what they call television, and go to movies with their parents on weekends. There are tricycles and bicycles, paved sidewalks to ride on, and toys to play with—lots of them.

I remember the many dreams in which I lived in that world. *But this is not a dream,* I now tell myself. I *am* walking on the bridge, away from home, determined to get to the other side of the river. I know those distant city lights are real. *I still have a long way to get to the other side*, I tell myself. Suddenly, I am filled with anxiety, like the river filling with water at high tide. I think to myself, Where *am I going to go this late in the day*? Unable to find a good answer, I tell myself, *You are going to get lost*. A realization sinks in: Everyone I know is on my side of the river, behind me. *Who would I go to on the other side*? I ask, frantically trying to remember someone, somewhere to go to, while I keep walking—now more slowly, uncertainly.

Alarmed, I notice a strange movement on the horizon on my left, where the river was trying to hide in the foggy sea of palm trees. The river, which was moving away from the bridge slowly and peacefully, is suddenly changing direction, coming back with a fury. It is now an angry wall of water as tall as the tallest trees I have ever seen. It rushes towards me, now frozen in place in the middle of the long bridge. In the background, the sky is covered by layers and layers of dark clouds, some as black as the night itself. *A storm is coming*, I warn myself. The wall of water rushes closer and closer, way higher than the bridge, angry and rushing. Shocked, a question creeps into my mind: *Why is the river mad at me*? Unable to answer that question, in complete panic, I try to turn around. *Go back! Get off the bridge*! a loud voice in my head tells me frantically.

I can't move. My feet are heavy, like they are set in cement. For a moment, the world turns utterly silent. Not even the sounds of frogs and crickets can be heard now. There is no sound of passing cars or the shaking of the bridge. The world has stopped! The wave is almost on top of me, coming down with a fury. My scream suddenly breaks the silence!

I wake, gasping for air, drenched in sweat. The world is utterly dark. I see the Milky Way expanding from horizon to horizon, in all its majesty. The familiar smell of cool and damp polluted air fills my nostrils. The sound of crickets surrounds me. Yes, I am home! Around me, my siblings and my mother are asleep on mats on our flat roof. I try to go back to sleep, but the thought of life on the other side of the river does not leave my mind. With it comes panic and guilt that I do not understand. Hope and anxiety fill me as I fall back to sleep.

3

River of Life

It was the summer of 1958 that my family moved from a poor section of the city of Abadan, where I had grown up during the previous eight years, to an even poorer community outside of the city limits called Bahmanshir, taking its name from the river that separated it from the more developed areas of the city. Although I don't remember the details of the move, some memories of that period of my life are still fresh in my mind, even after more than half a century. Among them is a dream—or more accurately, a nightmare—that occurred in different variations across the years, bringing fear, anxiety, and guilt with it each time. I didn't know why I had it and what it meant. Six decades later, as I write, the psychologist in me says, pedantically, that the dreams were reflections of childhood traumas, fears, and desires for change. The mystic in me, however, questions that: Could the feverish dreams have been foretelling my future in mysteriously symbolic ways?

The move to Bahmanshir occurred almost simultaneously with my father's unexpected trip to Kuwait. "Your father has gone to Kuwait to work so that he can send us money for food and things," I remember my mother telling me. I had heard confusing bits and pieces of conversations between adults whispering to each other about his leaving. As an eight-year-old, I struggled helplessly to make sense of it. I was smart enough to know that the simple explanation was not the whole truth. "When is he coming back?" I sometimes asked my mother. Her response was always "soon," but with tears in her eyes. I knew he worked in a bread bakery in Kuwait. I still have the black-and-white picture he sent home of himself sitting in the bakery with a stack of flatbread in hand.

The Bahmanshir neighborhood was nothing like the bustling city. There was no running water or electricity. In the city, the rental places that we had lived in had intermittent electricity and a spigot of water in the middle of a courtyard or at the nearby intersection of lanes. In contrast, the houses in Bahmanshir were all on dirt lanes that were not wide enough for cars to pass through. The labyrinth of narrow lanes eventually led to the only paved road, the Ahwaz Road, which was an intercity two-lane highway. On the other edge of the vast dusty neighborhood, many lanes ended in a water canal or a field lined with date palms. The closest public bus stop was at the 7th Station Square, about two miles away, on the other side of the river.

With the move, I was lost. Everything was different. Suddenly, I did not have my friends and playmates. Come fall, I was enrolled at Sa'di school on the other side of the river. In previous years, when I lived inside the city limits, I used to walk less than twenty minutes to school through familiar neighborhoods, kicking cans along the way if I found them lying on the ground. Now, with the move to Bahmanshir, I had to walk more than twenty minutes crossing the bridge to get to a public bus stop on the other side of the river, wait for the crowded bus, ride four stops,

and walk another ten minutes to school after I got off. I would not have learned this new routine if it weren't for my grandfather accompanying me through the route for days. I then did that religiously by myself over the next years, rain or shine, rarely missing school or arriving late.

As a child, I knew that life was hard on my family, both before and after the move, since there wasn't enough money to pay for things that we children demanded—usual things, like tricycles and toys and such that we saw others had or that were displayed in front of stores. When I lived within the city limits in previous years, the neighborhoods that we lived in were usually crowded and run-down. However, I knew about the other neighborhoods in Abadan that were nice, with houses that had air conditioning, indoor plumbing, and consistent electricity. My father's cousin lived in one, and we visited his family once or twice per year. My uncle AbbasAli worked in a travel agency in another neighborhood that was even nicer. These neighborhoods had been built by the oil company when the British started it, providing thousands of houses to its workers. Even the blue-collar workers' neighborhoods, with houses boxed in by concrete walls, were very nice compared to where I lived in town. My new school was in one of them, in the Third Station neighborhood, named so because it was built near the third gate of the sprawling refinery.

When we lived in Abadan, life was hard. But it got worse, at least in some aspects, when we moved to Bahmanshir, especially with my father being absent for years. I did not adjust easily, even though I had help. My grandfather took the role of my father in those years. Uncle AbbasAli had already finished high school and had taken a job as a travel agent in Breim, the nicest neighborhood in Abadan. If I needed help with schoolwork, he would spend time with me in the evening after he got home. He and Uncle Reza, who was in eleventh grade when I moved, checked and made sure I did my homework every night. Uncle Reza wanted to become a teacher when he finished high school, a dream that eventually materialized (even going beyond that, he became the mayor of Abadan two decades later)[3]. Both uncles followed their own advice given to me daily: "Finish high school and become somebody." Little did they know that finishing high school was only a step in my long educational journey.

Most of the people living in Bahmanshir were poor migrants from other parts of the country who had moved to the area in search of a better life in the bustling city across the river. Others were native members of a big Arab tribe that formed a village nearby; most were small vegetable farmers who also raised goats and water buffaloes. Pockets of a few thousand Farsi-speaking blue-collar migrant families were scattered throughout the area, including my family and those who lived on the narrow dirt lane on which we lived. Aside from some after-school interaction with one of my classmates who lived in the Arab village and a few other kids from school, on a typical day, I did not have much interaction or exposure to Arabs, except if I was sent to buy vegetables from the farmer's market on the main road.

Some Arab families had water buffaloes. I could sometimes see these magnificent creatures, with their tall horns, lounging in the wide muddy canals that were connected to the river. On the riverside, or from the bridge, you could often see them grazing on tall grasses and bamboo that grew in the shallow waters of the riverbank. Water buffaloes were the main source of income for some of the Arab villagers, especially women, since they provided milk that was used to make and sell yogurt. We usually bought our eggs and dairy from these families directly or at the market on the main road, next to Cherdagh, the date-packing plant.

The Arab villagers burned dried buffalo dung as fuel for cooking and warming water. On a typical day, I could see plumes of smoke dancing in the wind, every now and then spreading all over the neighborhoods, making it difficult to breathe, and leaving a pungent smell in my nose.

Many families had only one water buffalo, their main source of income. I was astonished to see that they treated them almost like family members. Water buffaloes were never slaughtered for meat. Sometimes, when a water buffalo died, I could hear women howling loudly, mourning for hours or even days.

My mother and I and my four younger siblings, one of them still a baby, lived in two small interconnected rooms in my grandparents' house, across from their own two rooms on the rectangular courtyard. This was actually an improvement over life in the city, where we had always lived in one rented room. Similar to the other houses, our courtyard was fully enclosed, encircled by rooms and mud walls, with a wooden door to the outside. Our rooms were on two long sides of the rectangle. There were eight rooms in all, half leased to strangers, with a small storage room in the middle, on the opposite side of the courtyard entrance.

The courtyard was connected to the outside world via a covered corridor with a wooden door. When we entered from outside, on the right-hand side of the corridor were two steps up leading to the toilet, which was basically a molded concrete plate with an opening sitting on top of a well. A small oval opening, perhaps a foot wide, perched high on one side, was open to the outside, allowing for some light and ventilation. It also allowed an army of flies in. Next to the toilet, lower on the ground, was the bathhouse, a dark and damp space with no window to the outside.

I feared few places more than that dark bathhouse. I feared rats intensely during my entire childhood in and around Abadan. When we lived in the city, open sewage canals attracted big rats in the courtyards of our rental houses, especially at night. Although we often closed the door to our room at night, I was always afraid that rats would bite and cut my toes while I was asleep. That fear followed me to Bahmanshir. The bathhouse had a drainage hole that was flush with the sloped floor, taking water out to the sewage well under the toilet. I was sure that the rats, seen every now and then in the courtyard or outside, lived in that drainage hole.

The adults did not seem to be bothered by the rat problem. Either they did not believe that rats lived in the drainage hole, or they were not as scared of them as I was. I often thought about a plan to deal with the rat problem until one day, when I was in fourth grade, the solution presented itself. Walking back from school, I saw a big mound of yellow sulfur next to the line of oil pipes that ran parallel to the road, from the oil fields to the refinery. Apparently, the lift truck carrying it had broken down, forcing the driver to dump the load off the road there.

A few times before, I had thought of burning newspapers and putting them in the bathhouse to smoke the rats out. But seeing the mound gave me a better idea. I went home and brought a small bucket, filled it with the yellow powder, and took it back. I remember putting the sulfur on a pile of newspaper next to the drainage hole in the bath, setting the newspaper on fire with a match, and closing the sheet-metal door. When my uncle found out, he was very upset with me for bringing poison into the house and setting it on fire. I am glad our house was not made of wood; mud houses do not catch fire easily! Despite the reprimand and the slap on the back of my head, I was proud of my brilliant scientific plan to kill the rats that I assumed came and went through the hole!

The courtyard, like all traditional Iranian houses, was the center of our daily living activities, fully separated from the outside. My brother, two sisters, and I ran around and played in the courtyard all day. There were two large, rectangular, sunken flowerbeds in the middle of the courtyard, on the two sides of a water reservoir (*houze*). Each flower bed was about a foot lower than the rest of the yard, with sides that were lined with concrete. They took up most of the courtyard. Tucked under two tall date palms in each flowerbed, hibiscus trees were always

covered with deep-pinkish flowers. Around them, the ground was crowded densely with canna lilies that showcased white and deep-red flowers almost all year round.

The large rectangular reservoir in the center provided water for everyday use for the tenants in the house, except for drinking. It was filled in the evenings from water entering the house through a small storage room that was built around a palm tree. The river was less than a mile away, with wide canals spreading from it. When the river swelled in the evening high tide, the muddy canals would fill with water, pouring into smaller streams that extended all the way to our house, entering a small storage room through an opening in the back wall, and going to the courtyard through that room. My grandmother was the one who performed the filling ritual every evening. She would let the flowerbeds fill, allowing the debris to be cleared from the stream. Then she would let the cleaner water in the reservoir by lifting a small, metal drawer-like dam.

Buckets, pots, or the small hand pump on the reservoir were used to pull water for everyday use. Although the groundwater was at an accessible depth, it was too salty and bitter to be used for anything. The river water that filled the reservoir was fresh. Overnight, the sediment would settle to the bottom of the reservoir, and the water was clear for washing dishes, bathing, and all other cleaning needs. A concrete wall, about two feet tall, circled the outside edge of the reservoir to keep the children safe.

Our two connected small rooms functioned as our bedroom, living room, and kitchen combined. One was our living room, and the other was where we kept the cotton-filled sleeping mats, folded and piled up in a corner and covered neatly with a blanket each morning. The living area was lined with a rug, used for sitting, eating, and cooking. In the winter, there was a small kerosene-fueled Aladdin heater that burned during the cold parts of the day. Throughout the year, my mother used a kerosene single-burner Primus stove, similar to today's camping stoves, for cooking, usually putting it outside, next to the door, in the courtyard.

Next to our rooms was a small storage area that was built around a palm tree; the trunk of a date palm went up through an opening in the flat roof, with the crown a few feet higher. In summer, the ripened date bunches looked delicious, but they were too high for me to reach, no matter how hard I tried. Adults could reach them when they were standing on the flat roof.

There were three large unglazed clay containers, each propped up by a wooden frame about two feet off the ground. Each had a spigot attached near the base. We called them *hob-baneh*. A water delivery man would bring water from the river in late afternoons, when the tide was high and the water was clean and almost clear. To fill the containers, he would walk into the river, away from the bank where the water was less muddy. He carried the water in two metal containers hanging from a thick wooden rod on his shoulder. After he finished filling all the *hob-baneh*, my grandmother ran a piece of a glassy mineral crystal called *Zaagh* (alum, or aluminum sulfate) through the water. That caused the lightly muddy water to clear, with the mud settling down to the bottom.

Water for cooking and drinking came from these large containers. Drinking water was further poured into *koozeh*, smaller unglazed clay containers, to keep it cool. Water would seep through the pores of these smaller clay containers, keeping the liquid inside cool to drink. We poured water from them into a cup for drinking or filled the cup directly from the *hob-bane* spigot.

In the 1950s—especially if you were poor—birth, living, and death occurred all under the same roof. I encountered this frequently during my life in the Bahmanshir house, in previous places in Abadan that I had lived in when I was younger, and even later in life after moving from Bahmanshir. In the Bahmanshir house, there were two other rooms on the same side of the

courtyard as ours. These rooms were leased to a man and his two wives, one older and one younger, who had loud verbal fights with each other some mornings when the man left for work. The young wife was pregnant. One early morning, amidst a lot of screaming and commotion among the adults, a baby was born with the help of the neighborhood midwife (an old lady living a few lanes away). For days, I heard stories about how the man was upset that the baby was a girl. He wanted a boy. Soon, all of that was forgotten when the newborn's crying became a fact of life, day and night.

Hassan, my playmate, a year younger than I, was this man's son from his older wife. Often, he, my brother Ghodrat, and I played hide-and-seek behind the canna lilies in the yard. Hassan was often sick, sometimes staying in bed the whole day and missing school. Every few months, they took him to a doctor in the city, on the other side of the river, taking the bus many stops away. When I was in fourth grade, I was awakened one early morning by the sound of a woman wailing. Mother was already up too, telling us, "It is Hassan's mother." Taking the baby with her, she rushed out to the other side of the courtyard. Soon, other women also rushed to see what was wrong. I was told by my grandmother that Hassan's mother had found him dead in his bed. By then, the women were all crying while also trying to console his mother.

It was well after sunrise when Hassan's father and a few other men washed Hassan's body in the courtyard, fetching water from the reservoir. After the body was washed in a ritual ceremony, it was wrapped in a white shroud. I sat on the ground on the side of the courtyard, watching the ritual, taken over with a deep sorrow over losing my friend and a fear I could not explain. A procession of six or seven adults got out of the house to the cemetery, led by Hassan's father carrying my friend's body wrapped in a blanket in his hands.

For everyone around, this continuity of birth, life, and death in our daily living space was a normal routine. I was ten years old and had seen death before, in a different form. When our dog Sambo was poisoned by someone in the neighborhood more than a year earlier, he died in the morning, wailing in the corridor at the entrance of the house, where he often slept. There was nothing anyone could do. Crying, I begged the adults to take him to a doctor, but my uncle said that there was no doctor for animals. In retrospect, there were no doctors around for humans either. The unfairness and finality of death were a harsh reality that I learned about early on—and which scared me often. I had also experienced these feelings when my Aunt Fatemeh passed away a few months before Hassan died. She was probably the person in my life whom I loved the most, perhaps as much as my mother.

Aunt Fatemeh, my father's sister, was younger than my mother. She, her husband, and my two cousins lived in a modest house in Ahmad-Abad, a blue-collar neighborhood in Abadan. They had a rental room in a small three-bedroom house shared by another renter and the owner's family. Every now and then, I took the bus to a stop near the police station next to Ahmad-Abad and then another to a stop not far from her house. She and my cousins also visited often. My cousins and I used to play around in the courtyard or jump on the sleeping mats tucked in the corner of my grandmother's room, causing an uproar from her.

One hot day in the summer, one of my aunt's neighbors came to let us know that my aunt was seriously ill at home. I remember my mother and grandmother taking us children to her house by bus. When we got to my aunt's house an hour later, women were crying around my aunt's blanketed body on the floor. Seeing that, my mother and grandmother started wailing. The children were taken to the neighbors to keep them out of the house. Wanting to stay alone, I decided to stay behind. I remember that day, sitting outside, behind the house, on the ground,

leaning against the mud-brick wall, crying, feeling utterly lost and alone. When my friend Hassan died a few months later, I was already well familiar with death. Alongside that familiarity came a deep and persistent feeling of sadness and a fear of death, both mine and my loved ones, that lasted for years.

Throughout most of the year, when it was not too cold to sleep outside, we slept on cotton-filled sleeping mats on the flat mud-lined rooftop. Usually, in the morning, there were tiny black balls of soot all over the pillows, beds, and everything else. The balls were light and would float away in the wind when we shook the blankets and sheets to fold and stack them together. The soot came from the refinery on the other side of the river, which spewed smoke in the air day in and day out. Each night, I would fall asleep in complete darkness, gazing at the stars spreading like shiny dust, some blinking at me every few moments. The Milky Way made me feel so small, so insignificant, but I loved its beauty against the darkness of the sky. I would stay awake every night for a long time, wondering how my life would turn out when I grew up.

At that time, I had already developed a strong interest in becoming a teacher upon finishing high school, like my Uncle Reza, who often told me about his own aspirations for his future. During my early childhood, my father would often tell me that he wanted me to continue my schooling through the eighth grade and then enroll in a religious school that trained Islamic clerics (*akhund*). He would often say, "*We need an akhund in the family.*" In retrospect, I guess that this wasn't because having an *akhund* in the family was deemed a critical necessity. It was perhaps his religious deed or contribution to society. In retrospect, I think he believed that becoming an *akhund* was the best I could achieve in my life, given our dire circumstances.

Following his plan to prepare me for my future as clergy, while we lived in Abadan (on the urban side of the river), he enrolled me in Shikh Abdolrasoul Preschool, a free religious education school. Later, when my mother and I were visiting my grandparents in Jahrom for two months, I was enrolled in the neighborhood Quran school (Maktab Khaneh, or *Kootow Khooneh* in the local dialect). While there, I was also intensely tutored in reading and understanding the Quran by my Aunt Saltanat's husband every afternoon when he returned from work. I don't remember resisting these attempts, but I don't remember being enthusiastic about them either. Regardless, as a result of all these experiences, by the time I started elementary school, I was well-recognized in the family for my religious knowledge, making my father proud! With our move to Bahmanshir at the end of the second grade (and my father's absence for years), the push to continue my education in religious school gradually faded.

You will find out later in this book that as I grew older, things did not go as my father had planned for me. Going through elementary school and junior high, I gradually developed two reactions to that plan. Intellectually, I started to dislike *ahkonds* and hated imagining myself being one. I also became more and more confident that I could, one day, become a teacher, allowing us to get out of poverty.

When I lived in Bahmanshir, in the evenings we usually congregated on my grandparents' side of the communal courtyard, sitting on a big rug. Since we didn't have electricity until I was in the middle of fifth grade, we had a Coleman camping-type lantern that emitted bright light through a mesh of burning kerosene spray. I usually finished my homework right after returning from school, before dark. Sometimes, when I didn't finish before dark, I crouched next to the Coleman lantern and did my homework under the watchful eyes of my uncles. We also had two small kerosene lanterns that we could carry to the yard or toilet at night. Coping with darkness was a necessary life skill, even after modernity reached the neighborhood when an entrepreneur bought

a large generator and sold nighttime electricity to households that could afford to pay for one or two light bulbs.

Each family in our house had an icebox to keep food and fruits cool. Ice was a luxury that everyone paid for and never had enough of. It came from the factory truck that did not come to our side of the river. To get a quarter block of ice, one of my uncles would walk 30 minutes to the other side of the river, across the Seventh Station bazaar, where the distribution truck stopped early in the morning. He would wrap the ice in a large towel and carry it back home.

Most days in the summer, and sometimes during the weekends, I went with my grandfather to his herb shop in the city. Grandfather was a kind man with a white beard and white hair. Having lived in the neighborhood for many years, most people knew him. They called him Mol-la Hossein. The title *Mol-la* was used by everyone to distinguish him as a community elder (literally translated: a person who could read, although his ability in this area was largely limited to reading the Quran in Arabic). He had migrated from Jahrom, a rural town some four hundred fifty miles to the north. I don't know anything about his migration in the 1940s except that he had followed his three older sons, who had traveled to Abadan in search of work two or three years earlier. According to my uncle, it took them fourteen days to travel via Shiraz to Bushehr, and from there aboard a cargo ship to Abadan. Two years after that, grandparents migrated with two younger sons and a daughter.

Grandfather was an herbalist, known by many for his knowledge and experience in traditional medicine. He owned an herb store (*At-tari*) near downtown Abadan, providing a convenient alternative to the expensive and hard-to-access medical system there. I spent as much time as I could in his herb store, eager to learn from him. On most summer and weekend days, I would accompany him to his shop. It took us about an hour of walking and bus rides to get there. He was a fast walker; I often had to run to keep up with him along the long bridge to the other side of the river, continuing to the bus stop. Sometimes, when I was in fourth and fifth grade, I was allowed to take the bus to the city by myself after school or on weekends and return home with him later during the day.

In his shop, he had all manner of herbs and dried berries in big burlap bags lined up next to each other on the floor. There were colorful herbs, from dry red chili peppers to brown cinnamon sticks and bright blue borage flowers. Some of the bags lined the two sides of the entrance to the shop, even outside on the sidewalk, positioned against the wall. He would meticulously arrange these bags outside in the morning and move them back inside the shop before pulling down the metal accordion door at the end of the day. You could smell the sweet aroma of the herbs from many feet away when you approached his shop.

More exotic herbs were stored in small wooden drawers along the walls, all the way up to the ceiling. Some of these drawers were labeled; others were not. Regardless, Grandfather knew where every herb was. He could find a drawer of catnip or any other fancy herb without even thinking about it. When someone came in with a health complaint, he would get on the small ladder, pull out a drawer, and put a fistful of herbs in a small paper bag to give to them. Sometimes he would mix a few herbs and dispense them with instructions about how long to boil and how many days to use. There were no plastic bags to package the herbs. In the summer and sometimes on weekends, we sat on the floor and made small packets by cutting old newspaper, folding pieces, and gluing three sides with Serish paste (a plant-based adhesive that we made by mixing Eremurus-roots powder and water).

Sometimes one of my tasks for Grandfather was to sell candles on Thursday evenings at the

entrance to the shrine across the street from his herb store. Thursday afternoon was the beginning of the weekend, with schools closing early at noon. That evening was considered a holy time of the week. Visitors to the shrine, often women in black chador (head-to-toe covers), came in to light a candle or two and pray for a loved one to get cured of a disease or for relief from some hardship. The pilgrims bought one or two, or a whole six-pack of candles, offered to them by kids like me on the sidewalk outside of the shrine. One of my challenges was to compete with some other kids, who sold candles cheaper than I could. Apparently, the shrine keeper cheated by putting out the candles people lit as soon as they left, shaving the tips, and giving them to kids to sell at a discount. Life wasn't fair, I knew well by then, and this was another piece of evidence of that. It infuriated me, but there was nothing I could do.

During the school year, sometimes getting to the bus stop on Seventh Station Square was an ordeal. Usually, the cool and damp breeze was nice during the fifteen-minute walk through the walkway on the side of the road along the long bridge. However, on some winter days, the river was foggy and the air was cold. I could feel it under my skin, shivering even more as cars passed. When it rained, even though the speed limit on the bridge was low, passing cars splashed water on the walkway. I would arrive at my school with wet pants legs on those days.

Every now and then, rainy days were disaster days for another reason. The clay ground around my house and in the narrow lane would turn muddy and slippery, making it hard to walk. It would take me longer to reach the paved road, with shoes fully covered in mud. On those days, walking along the narrow dirt lane to go to school early in the morning, I had to cross a small bridge over a canal five or six yards wide. The bridge was made of palm tree trunks and fronds curved up and topped with clay soil. When it rained, the curved surface became very slippery. More than once, I fell flat on my back when crossing that mud-covered bridge. There was no time to go back—and I did not own a second set of clothes to change into, anyway. On those days, I went to school with mud caked on the back of my pants and even the back of my shirt. My teacher was keenly aware of the reason. If it wasn't for his effort to calm me down, I would have been in tears on those days. However, he could do little to prevent other kids from teasing me and a few others like me during recess.

Despite all the challenges, I loved going to school. My teachers often gave positive feedback about my performance, and I was proud of that. When I was in fifth grade, I had a teacher who saw things in me that perhaps others did not. I don't remember his name and barely remember his face. But I remember his caring, kindness, and encouragement. I tried hard to be a model student in his class. I dreamed of being like him one day. He believed in me and gave me opportunities to be a leader in my class, a role that I was very proud of. He even asked me to help him correct dictation papers and help other students with their reading.

Even though poverty was everywhere, and life was hard, my memories of Bahmanshir are not all gloomy. The New Year holiday (*Nowrooz*) is among the events that I remember fondly. *Nowrooz* was my favorite time of the year. Occurring on March 21, it is the beginning of spring and the start of the year in the Persian calendar. Coming from old Persia, it is celebrated as the most important national holiday, lasting thirteen days. When I was a child, I liked *Nowrooz* because school was closed during the thirteen days of celebration. On the first three days, my grandparents would spread a long tablecloth (*sofreh*) on top of the worn-out Persian carpet that lined the floor of their room, wall to wall. It was covered with trays of fruits and cookies, and the *Haftseen*. *Haftseen* is an ancient Persian tradition for the beginning of the new year. Seven items that are symbols of life and rebirth, all starting with the Persian letter *S*, are put in the center of the tablecloth,

surrounded by New Year's decorations.

Every year, we all sat around the tablecloth at the exact moment of the new year, which was announced well ahead of time. National radio at that moment broadcast a special prayer that we all recited, along with a countdown of minutes to the new year. *Nowrooz* was great, with all the pomp and tradition. Like all other children, my siblings and I would get new clothes and new shoes ahead of the holiday. According to tradition, when the start of the new year was announced by the radio, everyone hugged and kissed, congratulated each other, and wished peace and health. People visited friends and family over the next few days, celebrating the new year. The best part of all of that was the *eidee*—money the adults gave children as a gift. Every *Nowrooz*, I would get what I considered to be a fortune from adults. The money went to my mother to pay back the money already spent on new clothes and shoes for us. The second-best part of *Nowrooz* was the picnic on the thirteenth day of the year. Every family would go out in the parks, fields, and gardens for the *Sizdeh-bedar* (literally translated: thirteenth being out). We kids ran around and played while the adults sat and talked, drinking hot tea.

On the first few days of the new year, my grandfather, who was the elder of the neighborhood and the family and was well respected, would sit next to the tablecloth with a back pillow against the wall, smoking his water pipe. As is the tradition, the neighbors and friends, as well as the few relatives who all lived in the city on the other side of the river

Grandparents

would come and go, one by one or in small groups, to say Happy New Year dressed in new clothes —boys and men in suits and women in colorful dresses, all well-groomed. They would sit on the Persian carpet around the decorated tablecloth, each leaning against the wall with a colorful pillow at their back. The tablecloth was surrounded by colorful back pillows for people. Visitors were offered cookies that were piled up in long trays on the tablecloth, and hot tea was offered on a tray by my grandmother or uncles. Guests sat for fifteen minutes or sometimes longer and left

after hugging and kissing everyone. Adults would kiss the children, one by one, and would give them *eidee*. The only sad part of all of this for me was that my father was absent during those years.

Another fond memory of those years concerns the river itself. The Bahmanshir River separated our desolate neighborhood from civilization. It was sometimes dreamy, mystical, and slow, with tall date palms on both sides and river buffaloes on the banks grazing on the bamboo which grew in the shallow water. The river was not so calm at low tide, when the water was muddy and fast. But in the late afternoons and early evenings, the water would rise almost to the level of the bridge. At these times, the water was a pale, muddy color and hardly appeared to move at all.

The long bridge had a narrow walkway on the side, with an iron-rod fence to protect pedestrians from falling into the river. In good weather, at high tide, I loved to sit on the edge of that sidewalk, holding on to one of the rods, with my feet dangling in the air through the guardrail. I would watch the water passing slowly, with fish jumping every now and then. On the horizon, where the freshwater of the river and the saltwater of the Persian Gulf fought with each other, I often saw thousands of fish schooling on the surface, and swarms of shrimp made the water look like it was boiling.

The river could be scary at dusk. There were stories about mysterious beings who sometimes appeared along its banks at night. They lived where the river bent and disappeared on the horizon, in the endless silhouette of palm trees. This explained why I walked fast on the rare occasions when I found myself on the bridge at dusk.

The river was the lifeline of our community—the source of our drinking water and the water needed by the palm trees and vegetable farms. It connected the fishermen to the gulf and provided tall grasses for the river buffalo to eat. So much life depended on that nurturing river!

On the other hand, the sad truth was that the life-giving river was also a barrier, separating us from a city that was mostly affluent and modern. This was a city in which homes had electricity, most had running water and sewage, and many had refrigerators and televisions. The bus route was on that side, as was my school. Further, scattered throughout the city on that side were restaurants, clubs, movie theaters, soccer stadiums, hospitals, and much more. Built from thousands of tons of steel and concrete, the long bridge that connected us to civilization also separated us from it. On our side, there were Arab farmers and fishermen, water buffalo and goat herders, and migrant service workers and their families, many of whom crossed the bridge to go to work or school daily. More than 225,000 refinery workers, their families, and others lived on the other side, in what I thought of as "the real Abadan."

I loved crossing that bridge every day. It gave me a chance to observe and absorb the beauty of the river on both sides. Although I often daydreamed about moving out of Bahmanshir when I grew up, the thought of losing the river and all that it represented in my life darkened my mood each time.

Struggling with many conflicting feelings, I had a recurring dream in which I tried to permanently cross that bridge to live on the good side of the river, in the city itself. But that dream was also a scary and sad nightmare, since I had to leave behind so much that I loved. Amid these conflicting emotions, I sometimes almost forgot that I *had,* in fact, lived on the other side of the river, in one of the poor neighborhoods of Abadan, during my first eight years of life. Even though I also had warm early childhood memories of that era, in my dreams and daydreams, I did not consider the places that I lived in during those eight years the true parts of real Abadan, my dream city!

4

My Dream City

"We were dead tired, walking in the dark, and we didn't even know where the path we were on would lead to. Suddenly, we saw the silhouette of a man who was trying to grab our attention by waving his lantern. We walked towards the light, going as fast as we could to catch up with him. Despite our efforts, we could not catch up with him—we could only see him and his lantern from afar in the darkness, clearly guiding us."

This was how Uncle Nasrollah told the story of his trip to Abadan with his two brothers, one being my father, years before I was born. In my childhood, I heard other stories of how this mysterious man, known as Khezr, had helped the lost to find their way home. I guess there are stories like this in many cultures. In many parts of the Middle East, there is a complex narrative about the mythical figure Khidr, who never died. But the local version (Khezr) was simple, as also reflected in stories my mother used to tell when I was a child: he was the guide, the rescuer of the lost. She told me how he had guided people in the mountains, in the desert, and in the marshes.

According to Uncle Nasrullah, that is what happened to him, my father, and my Uncle Hassan in the early 1940s. When my father was still a teenager, he and his two older brothers decided to go from Jahrom to Abadan in search of a better life. They had grown up in Jahrom, a small rural town in the mountains. Their trip had lasted a few weeks and had three parts. First, they got to Bushehr (a port on the Persian Gulf), sitting on top of an open-bed cargo truck. From there, they traveled on a cargo ship to Abadan. Encountering a storm in the Persian Gulf, the ship anchored in a port, forcing them to continue on foot from there to Abadan, through a vast expanse of marshlands.

In the story told by Uncle Nasrullah when I was a child, a group of men had been traveling on a path as nighttime fast approached. "We were going in the direction that we thought would take us to the other side of the marshes," he told me. As darkness came, they found themselves in the middle of miles of marshes, seemingly going in circles, not knowing where they were. Losing hope, they suddenly saw the silhouette of a man with a lantern in his hand. "We followed him, dead tired," he said. "In the early morning hours, we found ourselves near the main road on the other side. But the man was nowhere to be found, despite our calling and searching around." My uncle was sure that they had been saved by Khezr.

The story has had different details when told by different people who heard it secondhand. I am sure that my own memory of it is also distorted by the decades. Regardless of who told the story and how, it is a preamble to how Abadan became important in my family's life and in mine. About three years after the men migrated to Abadan, they asked their parents and younger siblings in Jahrom to join them in a city that had developed much in that span of time. Each of the sons had found a stable job during that period of fast development.

When the family was finally together, they settled in an undeveloped area on the banks of the Bahmanshir River, separated from the city by a long bridge. Not long after, my grandfather returned to Jahrom to find wives for two of his sons—one being my father—with a power of attorney to officially register their marriage for them. According to one story, he brought the two brides to Abadan by carriage, also accompanied by my mother's maternal uncle, who was migrating to Abadan himself. Like my father's trip story that I told you above, this one is also retold differently by two or three other people in my family who have heard it from older family members decades before, in one form or another.

I have learned in my life that remembering is incredibly selective. Still, I am sometimes surprised by how much I tend to discount the negative memories of some places that I otherwise loved, and augment the positive memories. Certainly, memories of my childhood in Abadan, are good examples of this. What my memory represents is a place that does not exist they way I once envisioned it, or perhaps never did. To me, Abadan has always been a dreamy island, full of culture and music, memories of childhood and of family. Distortion or not, I loved (and still love) the music and dances of the South (Abadani and the Bandari) and the sound of the local bagpipe (*NeiHamboon*). How can I forget the smell of baked Pomfret fish (*Zubaidi*) that was brought fresh from the gulf and covered with herbs before it was taken to the slowly cooling bread-bakery oven that was turned off for the middle of the afternoon break? Or the taste and the aroma of herb-drenched fish stew (*Ghalieh Mahi*) served on top of Basmati rice? I will always miss listening to and speaking with the local Abadani accent. My memories of poverty, stark inequality, and hardship are often faded, even when I deliberately try to zoom in on them.

The city of Abadan was an enigma, a collection of controversies. On one hand, it was a modern city built around the biggest refinery in the Middle East and perhaps the world, with 35,000 employees at one time. To me, as a child, it was the city of lights. At night, you could not see the stars because there was so much light coming from columns of burning gas all around the huge refinery that dominated the city. Abadan had movie theaters, radio and TV stations, and music halls that hosted concerts on a regular basis. It had a sizable international airport with flights to most of Europe and elsewhere. Girls went to high school and beyond, women drove cars, and some women were employed outside of the home. For the 1950s, these aspects were remarkably modern, on par with, or even surpassing, those of European cities. The city even had a boat club, where many small sailboats were anchored. It also had a horse club. These were luxuries unheard of in other places in Iran. The fact that these clubs were only used by the British and other high-echelon employees of the refinery did not diminish the city's prestige.

In Abadan, the refinery employees lived in modern houses, separated into neighborhoods that were zoned based on their status ("grade") in the refinery. Breim and Bavardeh were beautifully manicured neighborhoods with brick air-conditioned houses that had lawns in their front yards. Houses were surrounded by trimmed boxwood evergreen hedges and had running water and underground sewers. Neighborhoods had their modern supermarkets, shopping centers, and swimming pools. The white-collar workers lived in these neighborhoods. The blue-collar workers' neighborhoods were more modest—not as pretty, but still quite modern. The houses were smaller and attached, with running water and underground sewage, with a tiny courtyard in the back surrounded by concrete walls. Almost every family that I knew there, including two of my father's cousins, had a small vegetable or flower garden in their courtyard. A bus line connected these vast neighborhoods to each other and to the rest of the city.

The port city of Abadan was well known in the country and in the region for its modernity and

affluence, and everything else that came with that image, such as music and food. But if you lived in the city, you probably knew firsthand that not everything was so great. Even if you ignored the unrelenting heat and humidity, you could not ignore the air pollution caused by the refinery. Even if you didn't know about the slum outside of the city limit on the other side of the Bahmanshir River, perhaps you had seen glimpses of the other Abadan in the poor neighborhoods within the city limits. This Abadan was poor and conservative, on par with many small towns in the country, with traditional culture and inadequate services. Away from and on the margins of the refinery personnel's vast neighborhoods lived the service employees, small shop owners, and blue-collar workers. In these parts of the city, houses had intermittent electricity and were without air conditioning, despite the very hot and humid weather most of the year. Some of these neighborhoods had open sewage canals running through them and limited running water —often via shared spigots outside the houses at the intersection of lanes. In addition to the smell of the polluted air from the refinery, the foul smell of open sewage canals was among the many inescapable facts of life in this part of Abadan. Big rats and many cockroaches could be seen regularly around these poor neighborhoods on the margins of the city.

I was born in *that* Abadan! My early childhood years of life in it had a few things in common: poverty, moves, and instability. During the first eight years of my life, my family and I had moved five times among rental rooms on the same side of the city. All these places were rooms in houses with multiple units rented to families like mine, who shared a single bathroom and a small bathhouse. These places had one other thing in common: they were all within walking or biking distance from my father's bread bakery, a necessity for his going to work at 5 AM every day. I have a few memories of each of these places. What I remember is that each was a community of people who were close to each other for some time, until they moved to the next rental place. Three of the five houses that I remember had three or more renting families.

Whenever I think of the city, the two faces of Abadan collide. What everyone saw and read in the literature pictured the city as modern, vibrant, and exciting. My dreams and daydreams have been engulfed by that face of Abadan, both when I was a child and later. However, the reality of my own childhood life there was certainly dominated by the other face, the one that I often try to forget.

What I have been told is that I was born in Abadan in an era of turmoil and hardship in the world. The early 1950s were a time of recovery from World War II. The first signs of democracy were appearing in Iran, with the election of Mosadegh, the popular prime minister. At that time, the British had an ownership contract on Iranian oil and its production. In 1951, right before his election as the prime minister, Mosadegh had led a movement in the parliament to nationalize the oil industry. In 1953, there was a coup d'état orchestrated by the CIA and the British Intelligence Service, removing Mosaddegh and his government. Army tanks were on the streets of major cities, and paid hoodlums terrorized the pro-Mosaddegh crowds. The ouster of their beloved prime minister and reinstallation of the monarchy was an event that people never forgot, even today, almost seven decades later. Certainly, my father never forgot to tell the story, often[4].

Abadan's oil refinery was the center of conflicts between British covert operations and the Iranian National Front in the early 1950s. Mossadegh, who was himself educated in France and Switzerland, effectively ended the British ownership of the oil fields and the Abadan refinery. During their long history of presence in Abadan, the British significantly influenced the culture and topography of the city. These influences included the format and appearance of the living spaces—both the look of the houses and the structure of the neighborhoods. The influence

extended to the structure of the workplace and the everyday language of the workers. Change of ownership did not eliminate these cultural impacts. The Abadani Persian dialect (or accent) that I grew up with included many English terms, sometimes transformed by different pronunciations, mixed with terms from the Arab native population of the city. Nowadays, a quick search on the web would even yield an Abadani-English dictionary!

I was born and grew up within that rich and complex context —historically, politically, and culturally— that shaped much of my later personality and worldview. As I mentioned above, that context was also highly chaotic for my family, who were struggling with poverty and instability, living in rental rooms in houses that were right on or shortly away from open-sewer canals. I remember the stench and the blackish, slow current of these canals. I also remember the heat and humidity (sharji) of Abadan. On most days, when adults, including my father, came home for a midday break and a nap, the children were asked to play outside. Since each of the families lived in one room, there was no place for us to play inside when the adults wanted to rest. I remember playing with other children outside of the house on an early afternoon, etching shapes on the melting asphalt of the sidewalk with the soles of our shoes! Yes, it was THAT hot!

We lived in these neighborhoods until the end of my second grade, when my father left the country, his bakery was sold, and we moved to the Bahmanshir area outside of the city limits that I told you about in the previous chapter. Three years later, we moved from that slum area to Jahrom, a rural city 450 miles to the north, at the end of my fifth grade. In the following years, I returned to Abadan a few times, including two serious efforts that could have potentially allowed me to live there permanently. One such effort was at the end of my eighth grade, when I tried unsuccessfully to enter the Abadan Petroleum Technical School. Due to unforeseen circumstances described below, I ended up staying in Abadan for the entire upcoming school year.

This is how that story went: In the eighth grade in Jahrom, my religious studies teacher gave me a provisional failing grade (tajdeed). The way schools worked, before I could enroll in ninth grade, I was required to take and pass a test during a scheduled period at the end of summer. I was unable to take the test in Jahrom; since that summer, I traveled by bus to Abadan to take the entrance examinations of the Petroleum Technology trade school there. That was a high-priority event for me, because if I got accepted, I would live in Abadan for the next four years and perhaps would get a job in the refinery after graduation from that school. Since I was not able to return to Jahrom on time to take my failed religious studies test, I decided to submit the paperwork to the school system to transfer my test location to Abadan.

I traveled to Abadan in mid-summer, excited and anxious at the same time. My uncle AbbasAli and his wife lived there. I knew his wife, Showkat, well, since my family and I had lived in a rental room owned by her parents more than a decade earlier, when we were children in Abadan. She was two years older than me. I was excited to see her and my uncle again. Earlier, they had given me the green light to go visit and stay with them for what we assumed was a few weeks of intensive studying and preparation for the entrance examinations of the technical institute.

I took the entrance examinations and anxiously waited for the results to be posted. My hopes were crushed when, a few days later, my name was not on the posted list of one hundred or so who were selected. While waiting for the results that week, I also took my religious studies retake at the assigned local high school. In the letter notifying me that I successfully passed that last requirement for finishing my eighth grade, I was also notified that I had to register for my ninth grade in the same school district. That was a major shock to me and everyone in the family, since nobody had told us before that there was such a requirement. Appealing the policy took two weeks

and was not successful. Dropping out of school was not an option for me, nor would it be for anyone in the family, including my uncle. The only option was to stay in Abadan for the entire year of my ninth grade, the first year of senior high school at that time.

After all was said and done, it was too late to register in Razi, a prestigious senior high school that was also near where my uncle's house was located. I registered in another school in the same district that was a farther walk, while I was also put on a waiting list for Razi. When Razi unexpectedly had a space open, I moved there in the second or third week of school.

Razi was an upscale all-male urban school, and I was a poor country boy with very limited resources among mostly affluent kids. I did not fit in at all. Dressed poorly, almost with just one or two shirts that were washed by hand and ironed regularly (or not!). I had no friends in or outside of the school. I would just come and go. Later in the year, I made a friend, Behrooz, who was somewhat similar to me in personal and family aspects. His family was from Shiraz, and they were planning to move back there in a year.

Despite my emotional difficulties, the year of living in Abadan had a lot of appeal for me. Jahrom did not have a movie theater; Abadan had a few. I sometimes went to matinees by myself, with my friend Behrooz, or sometimes with my Uncle Reza. Abadan was much more modern and liberal than Jahrom in other aspects as well. Unlike Jahrom, most women did not wear a chador here, and you could see them driving around town. The city had modern soccer stadiums and a nationally known soccer team. One of my mother's cousins lived there, and her sons were both known soccer players in the community. I would visit with them often. They were master soccer players, and I wasn't that good, so I never got an opportunity to play soccer with them. But they taught me a lot about ways of life among the youth in Abadan, what I had missed in the previous decade of growing up away from there.

Intellectually, returning to Abadan had another unintended consequence: it exposed me to a modernist approach to religion. Ali Shariati, the influential French-educated philosopher and sociologist of that time, was being gradually recognized as a revolutionary, clashing with two sociopolitical forces of the time—one a growing modern dictatorship, and the other a regressive fundamentalist religious establishment under siege. He advocated for freedom, equality, and human rights as pillars of theology. He openly attacked the dictatorship of the time and criticized it for destroying the Iranian religion and culture, alienating people from their social and religious traditions. A few years before, he had co-founded the Freedom Movement of Iran, a popular underground anti-government movement of the time. In Abadan, I became familiar with his ideas a few years after his arrest in Paris for his active support of the Algerian resistance to French occupation. Upon returning to Iran, his strong voice against colonialism, cultural domination, and dictatorship made him an icon of the underground opposition, especially among the youth. Periodically, his work was censored, and eventually, he was imprisoned by the Shah's SAVAK, the secret service. At the time of my year in Abadan, he had been freed and allowed to work as a professor at Mashhad University.

Having a modernist worldview, Shariati was also against the fundamentalist traditional views of religions and God, encouraging a fresh reinterpretation. So, the fanatical religious establishment was not fond of him either. Much of the culture and worldviews that I had previously been exposed to, especially in Jahrom, were examples of such fanaticism. Other, more moderate, traditional religious circles in bigger cities (especially in Tehran) were very open to his revolutionary ideals. Uncle AbbasAli was among the young adults who were gradually understanding the fresh perspective that Shariati and a few others were presenting. A few times,

he took me with him to speeches and presentations about Shariati's ideas. That and other exposures led me to read any work by Shariati that I could find over the next few years. More than anything else, my worldview was being substantially reshaped by these and other readings.

In addition to my intellectual awakening, a lot also changed in my family during the year I was in Abadan. My grandfather had a stroke that paralyzed half of his body. So, my uncle Nasrollah took over his herb shop. He and his family lived in the old house in Bahmanshir with my grandparents, taking care of them. At the end of that school year, when I moved back to Jahrom, my grandfather's herb shop was closed, the Bahmanshir house was sold, and my grandparents were moved to Jahrom with my Uncle Nasrollah's family.

By the time I started my tenth grade in Jahrom, almost everything that connected me to Abadan had changed. Regardless, while I was happy to be back in Jahrom with my parents and my siblings, I missed my birthplace very much. Having lived in Abadan (and the Bahmanshir area right outside the city limits) as a child before had certainly made me different from my peers when I moved to Jahrom at the end of my fifth grade. But the year-long return when I was in senior high had affected me even more substantially: in attitudes, behaviors, worldviews, and aspirations. When I returned to Jahrom in the summer of 1965, I was even a greater misfit in the traditional rural town than before.

Returning from Abadan did not end the magical pull of that city on me. I visited my idealized birthplace a few more times, especially in 1972, a year after my college graduation, when I was doing my military service in Dezful, a small town about four hours by bus from Abadan. I'll tell you more about that later.

My last encounter with Abadan was depressing, unexpected, and brief, a decade after that, in 1982. It occurred during the Iran-Iraq War, when I lived in Shiraz as a university professor (I will tell you more about that role in later chapters). I could not see much of the city on that trip, since it was still in the direct line of fire and unsafe for civilians. I will tell you the details of that trip later. For now, suffice it to say that all I saw were ruined houses and date palms missing their top crowns due to artillery hits and subsequent fires.

Seeing my birthplace in that shape was disheartening. Abadan, the enigma, was not what it used to be. Tens of thousands of refugees from there had arrived in Shiraz shortly after the war began in 1980, including many in my own extended family. They had left in a hurry, leaving everything behind. I talked to some of them every now and then, reminiscing about the old days and the city they were forced to flee. My uncle, Reza, who had become the mayor of Abadan, stayed there during the war and the postwar reconstruction.

That 1982 visit was my last visit to the beautiful city that I had always dreamed of living in. despite all the hardships of my early childhood there, especially when my family moved to the opposite bank of the Bahmanshir River. The fact that I tried and failed to enter the Petroleum Technical School and, later, the Petroleum College, has never clouded my warmly distorted childhood memories of the idealized city. Decades later, when I browse through those memories, I sometimes question which side of the river was the "good" side. My warm longing for both sides of the Bahmanshir River in Abadan is still alive, even though other places have occupied some of that affective space over time. Jahrom, my ancestral homeland that I will describe next, is but one such example.

5

Nostalgia

Before they migrated to Abadan in the 1940s, both of my parents lived in Jahrom, a beautiful rural mountain town. They had been born in Jahrom when it was a small town, unlike the sprawling city it had transformed into by the time they passed away. Mother returned to her hometown in early 1961. We (Mother, me, my brother, and three sisters) moved from Bahmanshir to Jahrom. More than a year later, my father returned from Kuwait and joined us.

My parents had left Jahrom, hoping for a better life, returning a decade and a half later, seemingly without much to show for the effort, and having to rebuild their lives. For them, the migration seemed a failure. However, I don't have any doubts that their migration to Abadan substantially changed their worldviews and aspirations for their offspring. Perhaps more important than that, by determining my birthplace and that of some of my younger siblings, migration disrupted an intergenerational status quo of poverty. Certainly, by exposing me to a more modern life, it gave me a different mindset than if I had been born in Jahrom.

Jahrom was also the city of my grandparents. I have been fortunate enough to spend years with them when I was a child, two in Abadan and the other two in Jahrom, knowing them intimately. My knowledge of my great-grandparents, however, is limited and is largely based on conflicting stories that I have heard from different family members. Unfortunately, perhaps a sign of the era they lived in, regardless of their great influences on the lives of the family members, my great-grandmothers are largely absent from these stories. I must confess that the same disparity is also present in my own memories, where episodes and stories are often dominated by my two grandfathers, because they have been the source of decisions that have led to major changes in my family's history. I will share these decisions with you shortly.

In the past, I have heard conflicting stories about my paternal great-grandfather, Hashembag. One story indicated that he was a gunman hired from another town to defend a section of the small town of Jahrom. One early morning, he stopped a man who was passing through the neighborhood. That man was presumably a suspect in a series of robberies that had previously occurred at nights. According to one version of the story, he tells the man that if he sees him out at night again, he will shoot and kill him. Apparently, that's what he did one night when he was on his guard duty, seeing the man walking on flat rooftops that were all connected. Another, even more sinister version of this story is that he knew the man, loved that man's wife, and killed him on purpose. In both versions of that story, my great-grandfather ends up marrying the victim's widow. I have presumably descended from that marriage.

Another story I have heard is different. According to that version, Hashembag was a child in the small town of Larestan, which was a few days' travel from Jahrom. His father was a big landowner. When his father dies, his uncle takes over the land and everything else that the

deceased owned, and also assumes the responsibility of taking care of his family. The son grows up. When a young adult (I presume that it meant he was fifteen or sixteen), he gets into a fight with his cousin, the son of his uncle, over the ownership of one of his deceased father's parcels of land. He kills his cousin and runs away to escape prosecution. He walks for days over the mountains until he reaches the town of Jahrom.

At nightfall, exhausted, he stops at an orchard right outside of the small town, soon falling asleep under a tree. In the middle of the night, he wakes to the sound of people, apparently thieves, picking oranges and bagging them. He gets into a fight with them, and they run away. In the morning, when the owner comes to work in his orchard, he finds bags of his fruit on the ground and a young man asleep near them. Upon hearing the story, he likes the man and gives him a job in his orchards. After years of working for him, the man marries Hashembag's daughter. I am the offspring of that marriage.

I am not sure which version of this story I like better. Both include taking risks and moving to a new town that eventually became my ancestral home. Interestingly, there are also multiple stories about Rajab, my great-grandfather on my mother's side. In one, he is taken prisoner by the Jen (mythical creatures, which I will talk about later). That version is harder to imagine unless you really believe in Jen, the invisible creatures who coexist with us in our physical space. He is released one day without explanation, the story goes, never psychologically recovering from the trauma of his captivity, having hallucinations the rest of his life.

I like an alternative story better since it has a happier ending that I have seen evidence of when I was a young adult myself. The story goes like this: In the late 1910s, Rajab was a landowner living in Jahrom with his family. One day, he does not return home from the field. In one version of this story, he had a major fight with his wife that morning. They were not able to find him anywhere in the next weeks, months, and years.

More than half a century later, in the early 1970s, there was turmoil in the neighboring country of Iraq. Refugees poured in from Iraq, facing persecution because they were Shia Muslims. A large group came to Jahrom and was housed in a camp. One of the refugee families in the camp contacted my mother, claiming that they were her blood relatives. A young woman told my mother that her great-grandfather Rajab was from Jahrom.

I met that young woman during one of my visits to Jahrom, when I lived in Shiraz as a college student. Upon further digging into stories, it became evident that the common ancestor was my missing great-grandfather. Apparently, he had joined a pilgrimage caravan all the way to the holy city of Najaf in Iraq. I can't imagine how many months he had been in transit to cross those hundreds of miles on foot. Eventually, he gets there, settles down, marries, and has children. I was not able to find the reason for his initial departure. Perhaps seeking adventure, running away from something, or just seeking a better life. These are equally possible when I examine my paternal great-grandfather's reasons, his son (my grandfather), and his grandson (my father). Coincidence or not, there has been an intergenerational pattern of migration, also in effect in my and my siblings' lives.

When my mother (and I, plus three younger siblings) moved from Bahmanshir (Abadan) to Jahrom in the early 1960s, it was a happy homecoming for her. By the time I graduated from high school, we had lived there for six years. Much changed in my life after the move. Jahrom was very different from Abadan. At times, it felt like a different world. Abadan was a big, vibrant, and well-developed industrial city. It was modern, at least for most people who lived there. Jahrom was a dusty, small town—slow, underdeveloped, conservative, and very religious. In Abadan, most

women did not cover their hair or wear a chador. In Jahrom, most had to. On my side of the town, all girls had to; otherwise, they were chastised or punished.

The town, with a population of about seventy thousand, was informally divided into eight neighborhoods called *mahaleh*. In the distant past, some of them had been separated from the rest with border walls (earlier, I told you the story of my great-grandfather being the sheriff of one of these neighborhoods). But in my childhood and adolescence, there were no clear borders between them.

I lived in one of the oldest, a close-knit community called Kooshkak that was somewhat culturally isolated from the rest of the world, except for the young men who went to Kuwait or other Persian Gulf states to work and send money back home. And these young men took the bubble with them wherever they went, living in their own communities that were microcosms of their home culture. Regardless, when they returned, for a short visit or a longer stay, they brought with them stories and examples of material modernity, such as watches, radios, and small gadgets, or even bigger items like washing machines. The sleepy neighborhood was slowly waking up to modernity and change.

The community was dominated by fanatic interpretations of Islam. There were no movie theaters, since movies were considered haram and corrupting. Youth activity centers were scarce. Neither my family nor others had TVs until years after I left for college. Overall, there was little to do outside of the school in the way of recreation, except play soccer and work in the orchards and farms.

Most boys in my neighborhood went to school until the end of elementary school, then joined the labor market. A few finished high school, some in my cohort. I did not know of anyone in my extended family or neighborhood going to college. Girls were often not sent to school beyond the elementary level; education beyond that was considered corrupting. I did not know of any woman driving a car, although I had seen a few on the other side of town, in more modern sections. Actually, in my entire neighborhood, nobody, man or woman, had a car except a distant cousin of mine who had a taxi and drove that for a living.

Within that conservative context, there was constant conflict between my maternal uncle Ali and my parents and me over sending my sisters to high school. Ali was older than my mother and heavily engaged in the affairs of the extended family. Although he had finished high school himself—and was employed in the bank on the other side of town—he did not think that girls in the family needed to continue their schooling beyond elementary school. School was going to corrupt them, he believed, and they needed to marry as soon as feasible. My parents and I opposed his views vehemently, and a few times, when I was a teenager, I told him to mind his own business. This was a major break from the pecking order in the extended family, and caused havoc.

When we moved from Abadan to Jahrom, my mother was right at home from day one, happy to be with her parents and eight siblings. I don't think the necessity of living in my grandparents' house for a year bothered her at all. From day one, she contributed to the workload, both household-related and in the home-based business of preparing citrus products and dates from my grandfather's orchards. The move out of Bahmanshir (Abadan) was, as far as I can tell, initiated by my mother's family. My guess is that with my father's move to Kuwait a few years back, there was little to keep my mother in Bahmanshir. Life in that area of the city was not easy for her. We were largely dependent on my grandfather, although I imagine my father was sending some money home from Kuwait. When we were adults, my sister shared with me what my mother

had told her a long time ago: that my grandmother (her mother-in-law) gave her a very hard time when she lived there. A big extended family in Jahrom—parents, brothers, sisters, and many others—provided the support system that she needed at that time. I am surprised it took her three years to come up with, or agree to, a plan to move.

Uncle Rasoul was the one who came to move us from Bahmanshir to Jahrom. I don't remember anything about preparations for that move or my paternal grandparents' reactions to it. Being closely attached to my grandparents and uncles, I can only assume that the move was not an easy event for me. What I do remember is the big culture shock of going to school in the town, which continued for a long time.

I remember the move, traveling in the back of a truck in the open cargo compartment that was surrounded by a wooden wall five or six feet tall. We rode on top of burlap bags full of rice or beans or such things throughout the eighteen-hour trip, sitting or lying down on cotton-filled quilts. We had a few belongings with us besides suitcases, mattresses, and blankets. The driver and my uncle (who also helped with driving) were in the front cab. That way of traveling was much cheaper for the six of us than going by bus. We stayed one night in Shiraz, in a relative's house, whom I remember nothing about.

My maternal grandparents' house in Jahrom was the center of many activities involving a large number of adults and children in the extended family. On and off, four generations lived in that house until my great-grandmother, who lived with us there, passed away. Other members of the large family would come and go, especially during harvest time. Culture and physical space interacted harmoniously with each other in our lives there, in a way that is perhaps not seen today. I often add this to the list of losses that I consider casualties of social modernity and the passage of time. I will try to get you a glimpse.

The house had buildings on two sides, connected with mud-and-straw walls on the other two sides of the small, enclosed courtyard. On one side, a large room opened into a long hallway with a large opening going down to the courtyard with five or six wide steps. That was the living room in which meals were served in that space, on an eating mat (sofreh, a rectangular tablecloth spread on the floor) with everyone sitting on the floor around it. The opening of the hallway was covered with a wall made of a large metal frame with glass installed on the top and sheets of metal at the bottom. In the winter, an open charcoal-burning portable stove warmed up that area. Sitting around the tray in the evenings was a great family time. The stove was sometimes covered with a metal frame about two feet high (*korsi*), with a blanket on top. Grandpa would sit on the ground on one side of that *korsi*, leaning against the wall with his feet under the blanket, others sat at various distances from him, talking and laughing at each other's daily stories.

During the rest of the year, the metal door of the hallway was left open all the time, allowing for the breeze to run up the roof through the brick stairway in the back of the hallway, which looked like an ascending tunnel. Next to the hallway was a long room, the same length as the hallway, connected to it with a small wooden door. This room served as a sleeping space for most of us. Under both of these spaces was the basement, a dark and cool place, half buried in the ground, with two rows of glass windows, maybe two feet high, that opened to the courtyard. That entire side of the courtyard was occupied by my grandparents, two young uncles, my youngest aunt, and us (my mother and 5 children).

In the corner of the courtyard, there was a water reservoir (*houze*). It was next to the water well, which had tall brick columns on each side of it. A wooden wheel perched on top of and between the columns, with a metal rod in the center. The wheel directed a thick rope woven from

date-palm fiber down to the well. Water was pulled out of the well by hand, using that rope and wheel. Like everyone else in the household, Mother would take turns pulling water from the deep well with a rubber bucket and emptying it in the *houze* for daily use, or in clay containers for drinking. On the side of the reservoir was a huge eucalyptus tree going all the way up, higher than the second-floor roof of the building next to it. When someone caught a cold, my uncle, who was a year older than I, or other kids, would climb that tree to get leaves to put in boiling water for the sick to breathe under a blanket.

Way high in the corner of that second floor of the building, still under the canopy of the huge eucalyptus tree, there was a small room with openings to the courtyard housing honeybee hives. This room was always buzzing with bees. The hives provided honey for the entire family, including those who were not living there.

On that side of the courtyard (across from the living room hallway), the building was on top of a long, covered, and dark pathway, like a tunnel, that connected the inner courtyard to the outside through a heavy wooden gate. A pale lightbulb hung in the middle of the tunnel, providing some light at night. Opening into that pathway was the cooking area, where my mother and others would bake bread on the curved surface of a paper-thin clay oven (*brizeh*) that they burned wood under. Every morning, you could smell the sweet aroma of fresh-baked flatbread on the *brizeh*. We kids loved to sneak in and grab a spinach *pipokh* that was made by wrapping sautéed spinach in flatbread dough (like a calzone) and cooked on the brizeh. If I close my eyes today, I can still smell it, especially if I am hungry! The cooking area also had places for cooking on top of a wood-burning grill.

Within that traditional, complex, and interconnected social system, life was simple. When it wasn't warm, most of us slept on the floor of the main room or sometimes in the basement on cotton-filled bedrolls that we spread on the floor at night and rolled up and put away in the morning. My grandparents slept in the living room hallway. When it was warm, spring through fall, most of us slept on the flat roof on our cotton-filled mattresses. I loved falling asleep in the cool mountain air that was filled with the smell of a mix of orange blossoms and jasmine, watching the Milky Way.

After school, during the weekend, and in the summer, all the older boys in the extended family (all twelve of us!) helped in Grandfather's orchards. Mother and the girls helped at home, both with chores and in various capacities like processing the *toranj* (a type of citron) harvest for sale. The thick green shell of *toranj* had rough skin and thick pulp, maybe a quarter inch thick. They cut it in half, carved the soft part out of the center to be used for juice, and then put the pulp in the sun to dry. Selling bags of dried *toranj* pulp at the end of summer was a significant part of my grandfather's income. Wholesalers bought big burlap bags of it and sold it to smaller operations that made marmalade with the soaked pulp. Mother also helped by juicing limes with a wooden roller, and cooking and preparing yellow sweet dates by running a thread through them to hang for drying in the sun. These last two also generated quite a bit of income.

On a typical summer day, I and the other boys helped my grandfather in the orchards. The help group included twelve of us: Four uncles, me, my brother Ghodrat, and seven of my cousins. We all helped in three orchards: two small ones that had mature trees within the town boundary, and the other with younger trees located further, requiring thirty to forty-five minutes of walking.

Aside from helping in the irrigation and upkeep of the trees, each of us had the responsibility of picking fresh dates for the familys' consumption from the tall date palms. In the summer, both at lunch and dinner at home, we ate bread with fresh dates and plain yogurt, made by my mother

and grandmother. We also contributed to the household by planting vegetables around the young palm and orange trees in Grandfather's younger and sunnier orchard. Each tree was surrounded by a dirt-mound ring almost a foot tall, with a diameter of about nine to twelve feet, depending on the age of the tree. Each of us picked a few trees and planted vegetables in the soil mounds around it.

Among the adventures that I remember is that one spring we decided to surprise our family by planting cotton. We got the seeds from the agricultural extension guy, who was a friend of my grandfather's (himself a former agricultural extension guy). At the end of summer, the surprise matured. We picked the cotton bolls, expecting to use them in pillows and sleeping mats at home. The thought of having new pillows, with fresh cotton from our planting, was exciting. But we soon found out that the world was not that simple. There were big black seeds stubbornly attached to cotton fibers within each boll. We brought bags of cotton home to pile up in the courtyard. But neither my mother nor anyone else had a way of separating the big black seeds. Don't remember what we did with all that cotton, but I never forgot the disappointment of the failed venture.

We did much better at other times. For example, one summer we all decided to plant a special type of squash called *kadoo-mol*i (a local green squash that has a narrow neck and weighs a few pounds when full size). We had a big harvest that summer. When the neighboring farmer plowed the soil, there were plenty of soil clumps, some as big as a small pillow. We dug a big hole, made an oven with rocks and clumps of soil, put branches and dry grass in the bottom, and lit a fire. When the wood was burned, we piled the squashes on the charcoal, then collapsed the oven on itself. The next day, when we dug them out, the slow-cooked squash bounty was ready, each fully cooked in its own skin. We had plenty in the orchard and at home to eat for the next several days.

When the orchards were ready for harvest, we all helped Grandfather and adult uncles pick oranges and carry them to the front gates. The orchards were not far from each other. One was relatively small, perhaps eighty by two hundred yards, surrounded by larger neighboring orchards that were separated by mud-and-straw walls. Khiari, the other orchard not far away at the end of a narrow-walled lane, was larger, with numerous date palms towering over the mature orange and lime trees that were fifteen or more feet tall. Each fall, the oranges were picked by hand in reachable areas or with the aid of hooks tied to long handles from higher branches. We put them in small baskets and carried them to the front gate of the orchard.

At the end of the day, the buyer, a middleman, would come with his small pickup truck to take away the fruit. We had already separated the deformed or small ones under the supervision of Grandfather. Those were ours to take home to our families. The older boys carried small burlap bags full of these rejected oranges on the back of their swaying bicycles, walking them all the way home. Every year, Mother would meticulously keep our share of the bounty in a cool corner of the house. We had fruit for months.

A part of being a kid was doing things that we were not supposed to do! By the end of the day, each of us had hidden a few nice fruits underground somewhere. The trick was to not let anyone see it, especially the adults who would get very angry at us. For them, nice fruits meant more money to buy food and other necessities. We knew that, but we did it anyway. But there was an unwritten rule: not to touch other kids' hides. Every now and then, fights occurred between us when someone found and took someone's hidden stash in scavenger hunts in the following days. There were also other unwritten rules. For example, we never went too far: only a few oranges. We strictly honored our agreement regarding which date palms each of us was allowed to pick fresh

dates from for our families. This was a matter of family nutrition that could not be messed with. Among Grandfather's adult offspring, each family had one or two allocated date trees.

On most summer days before noon, I would climb one of the date trees that was assigned to us and fill a basket hanging on my shoulder with fresh ripe dates to bring home. I was not as capable as my older cousins in climbing old date palms. Taller trees, perhaps forty feet tall, were out of my league, especially if they were old with slippery trunks (adults used a special belt that wrapped around the tree and their hips and pulled themselves up foot by foot). Younger palm trees had jiggered trunks with the stumps of previous years' cut fronds acting like steps to stand on and hang on to when pulling yourself up. One of our favorite activities in the summer was climbing the date trees in the *Khiari* (the larger orchard), which were not too difficult to climb. We sat on the fronds twenty to thirty feet up, chatting with each other and eating fresh dates. We often picked and cut each yellow date in half with our teeth, poured in the juice of Persian limes that we had brought with us in our pockets, and ate. I hope I am giving you a good window to observe how simple joys in life are the best!

Sometimes we sat up there, hanging in the sky, for an hour or more, listening to the sounds of gardeners in the orchards around us singing loudly. I remember a part of a popular orchard song:

"We said goodbye in the afternoon and departed!
Took hearts off our loved ones, and left!
Set our path towards pilgrimage!
Put our trust in God, and departed!"

There were many songs, most sad, many about leaving. A long time ago, I read somewhere that perhaps the sadness of the orchard songs was because it took so long (sometimes up to ten years) for date trees to bear fruit. If you planted a tree and had to wait ten years to see the fruit, you would be sad too! Or maybe the songs were sad because opportunities were so limited or because people were bored. Regardless of the reason, they were often just sad. Often, there was a back-and-forth exchange of songs, with one person singing a verse and another person from a distant orchard (or one of our people) responding by singing another.

I have many warm memories of the *Khiari.* As I grew up, it became a place of solitude and refuge for me. Such solitude was necessary at times for a teenager living in a household with parents and many siblings, all cramped into two rooms. Added to all of this was my own impatient and restless personality as a teenager who found it difficult to sit for many hours and study. In fact, the only reason I succeeded in my last years of high school and in the college entrance examinations in the final year was that I used my own method for studying, especially during the spring. On most days, I would wake up at dawn and bike to the *Khiari*. The air was cool and crisp under the shade of palm and citrus trees as the sun filled the sky, with birds singing all around. The smell of lime and orange blossoms was in the air all the time. It felt like a piece of heaven on earth. I studied while walking most of the time, even solving math problems that way. Walking back and forth, I would memorize English vocabulary, the structure of a chemical compound, or details of a botanical family of plants. When I got tired, I sat on the ground under the canopy of an orange tree with my back against its trunk.

Although working in the orchards was a group activity that brought us children close together, we also did other things together when the seasonal workload was light. We sometimes hiked the rocky mountains on the side of town, searching for springs of fresh water and cool caves in the ravines. We rested in the deep and narrow canyons that were cool during the day, chitchatting

loudly. On some winter weekends, we hiked all the way to the peak if it was covered by snow. Snow was a novelty, occurring once or twice each year on the mountain peaks and lasting only a few days. When there was fresh snow, we would hike to the top, taking spoons and jars of date molasses with us, spreading the molasses on the snow, and eating it. That was our version of today's shaved ice! It would usually take us three to four hours to hike up. We were sweaty and tired, and it was cold when we returned home at dusk. Almost without exception, somebody in the group would catch a cold and cough for days.

In the summers, sometimes our pastime was to go to *Sang Eshkan*, the mile-long man-made cave that was created as miners cut limestone. Sometimes my mother and my sisters went with us. It was dark and cool in the cave, and we could hear men cutting stones with huge saws, two men per saw. Using dynamite was not allowed or safe, and there was no machinery to use. You could hear men singing in the deep end of the cave while pulling and pushing a big saw between pairs of them, cutting the limestone. Across decades, this primitive way of mining and cutting the white stone had created miles of branches of the huge cave that is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site as the longest man-made cave in the world.

Although moving from Abadan to Jahrom made my emotional life richer, the school, new classmates, and different expectations were all sources of stress for a while. In the first or second week of school, my sixth-grade teacher asked who wanted to read a part of the text (a story). I was comfortable doing that in my previous school in Abadan. So, I raised my hand and was proud of doing a great job. I was not in the same league as others, who had a problem with my strange Abadani accent, reading style, and the attention that the teacher paid me. I was ridiculed in the days and weeks to come. My accent stayed and did not go away, even after many years. The irony of having an out-of-place accent throughout my life never escapes me! Anyway, the next time the teacher asked for a volunteer, it wasn't me. Gradually, I adapted and found a few friends. But, by and large, I remained an outsider in the first years and even later.

Living in Jahrom required a different lifestyle than what I had been used to in Abadan. After two years of staying with my grandparents, my father returned from Kuwait and established a new bread bakery in the middle of town. We rented a house that had one long room and a hallway on top of a half-buried basement. There were also two dilapidated rooms across the enclosed courtyard where Mother kept a sheep, a goat, and a few chickens. A few stairs connected the hallway to the courtyard, and more stairs on the other side connected it to the flat rooftop. The house had two wells. The shallower of the two was the covered sewage well on top of which the bathroom was built. The other was the water well, located in a corner of the courtyard. Drinking water, as well as water for all other uses, was pulled from it with a bucket made from a recycled tire tube connected to a thick rope made of woven strands of date-tree fiber. Due to the proximity of the two wells, the drinking water had a slight smell that was noticeable some of the time.

Mother or one of us would lift water from the deep well and empty it into the raised reservoir (*houze)* next to it or pour it into open-mouth clay containers. The sweating of the clay kept the water cool for drinking. The open reservoir that was about six feet high off the ground was for washing and all other uses. A spigot was installed in the middle of it, about three feet above the ground, for washing hands and other uses, such as washing clothes in a washbasin. Mother was a great entrepreneur. She put together a cooling system on the edge of that reservoir to distill rose water and other aromatic liquids, such as mint water, and sold them to people in the neighborhood and beyond.

We lived in that house for two years until my parents had a house built not very far from it,

next to an old, abandoned agricultural well near my maternal aunt's house. I was in ninth grade, in Abadan, living with my uncle, when the new house was finished. When I returned from Abadan, I decided to add modernity to the house by adding a wash basin. Since there was no running water, I decided to run a pipe from the raised water reservoir around the corner to the side wall of the courtyard and install the washbasin on the wall itself. Wastewater had to go to the deep flowerbed in the middle of the courtyard that had a palm tree in the center.

Perhaps I should share with you the experience of that day, to give you a glimpse of the world at that time and place. It was a sunny and warm day in the fall, and I was working on the pipe with my shirt off. The door to the courtyard was ajar. Suddenly, Zarrin and her mom opened the door and stepped into the courtyard. Zarrin's dad was my mom's maternal uncle. I had a major crush on Zarrin. Many days, I would arrange my walk home to go through the narrow lane where she lived, hoping to see her going to or from school. But no one knew. At that time, families condoned and even encouraged marriage between second cousins. So having a crush on Zarrin was not taboo. But I was too shy to let anyone know, at least until the time was right. Maybe she also knew how I felt, but we never got a chance to talk about it, or to talk alone, period. That was the way life was in those days. We never got a chance in the future either, since a few months after that day, she lost her life tragically when a propane tank in her house exploded. That tragedy was perhaps another price of modernity, since using expensive propane kitchen stoves was quite a new concept.

Despite my childhood closeness to my cousins, activities with them gradually decreased in my last two years of high school. Some of them did not go to high school or dropped out before finishing. By the time I was in twelfth grade, my circle of friends had replaced the circle of cousins from my childhood. Aside from a natural switch to a community of peers rather than family, there was another reason for this weakening of the bonds. I was becoming increasingly different from them in my worldview and life goals. In the last two years of high school, I hung out with friends from other parts of town rather than my neighborhood because they thought like I did. I was schmoozing with Mr. Ray, an American Peace Corps volunteer, whom I would invite to visit my family from time to time. This was not received well in the conservative community around me. More than once, my neighbors told Mother that she was sinning by hosting a non-Muslim. To me, this was utterly stupid.

Even before all of that, starting a few years before, a different worldview—inconsistent with much of what was around me—had been developing in me and was beginning to take over my life. Aside from exposure to different people (including Mr. Ray), some of that change was rooted in my extensive reading of mostly translated literature of the Western masters. An aspect of that change was my exposure to highly controversial views of religion, which I also alluded to in the previous chapter. Since my return from Abadan, I was reading books with overt or hidden political themes—especially about oppression and resistance movements. Persian translations of Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, and The *Wretched of the Earth*, as well as work by Shariati and Ale-Ahmad were among them. among the other authors whom I was extensively readingwere Hedayat, Kafka, Camus, and Sartre, completing my portfolio of alienation and confusion about life!

Let me give you another example, among many, that was changing my worldview almost day by day. There was a small bookstore off the Mosal-la square, near my father's bakery store. Walking home from my high school, I often stopped at that bookstore to look at the books that were on display in two or three racks placed on the sidewalk. When I was in eleventh grade, one

day, reading the front and back covers of those books, one caught my interest.

A small paperback book that I caught my eyes that day was The Gadfly by Ethel Lilian Voynich. Reading the back cover, I found out that the book was about a member of an underground resistance movement who was betrayed to the Security Services by a Catholic priest in whom he had confided. I purchased that translated paperback book and read it multiple times because I could not understand what was going on, especially the parts that discussed the detailed rituals of Catholicism. Imagine a seventeen-year-old boy in a conservative Muslim community hopelessly attempting to learn about Christianity by trying to understand Catholicism through the Gadfly!?

Even before going to college in Shiraz in 1968, my contact with my circle of uncles and cousins in Jahrom was partly broken. I was very well-read and exposed to worldviews and ideologies that were fully alien to my childhood community. Over time, my world and theirs became very different. My last contact with a part of the old army of cousins was in 2003 when I went to Jahrom after more than three decades of being away to visit my father (I will tell you more about that trip later). Kazem, my maternal uncle, and a few of the cousins who were in town came to visit, sitting in my father's living room, leaning on pillows against the wall. Seeing them and their spouses and children, I traveled back to the good old world of our childhood. By some standards, today or even half a century ago, those years were difficult times in my life. Somewhat surprised, I asked myself, *Am I really missing those days?* The answer had been there for a long time: *Yes,* I did miss them. I missed all the good times with the "gang of twelve!" that had fallen apart by then.

The world had changed so much in a matter of a few decades. The youngest member of the group of 12 had been killed in the war, and three of the oldest had passed away. Although only my brother Ghodrat and I had gone to college and beyond, the rest of the group were scattered around the globe, four working intermittently in Kuwait or other Persian Gulf countries. I was living in the U.S., and Ghodrat was in Australia. What struck me the most was how clumsy and out of place I felt and perhaps sounded. How alien I was to them, and vice versa. Some of the shared jokes, shared joys, and many common experiences didn't make sense anymore. So much had changed in me, in them, and in the city, although the conservative culture had largely stayed the same. It dawned on me that I had lost so much of my old life and culture that I often longed for, and there was no going back.

The saddening impact of that realization was somewhat diminished when we spent some time laughing at our old stories. Even the old memories of childhood fears and the pains of poverty were suddenly sweet. We cherished and laughed at even the scariest stories of our childhood, such as the ones about the Jen. I am going to describe some of these stories in the next chapter, to share with you how old stories leave their footprints in the psyche of people who grow up in a culture, especially one so ancient.

6

Fear of the Unseen

One of my strongest childhood fears involved the Jen, invisible beings that we believed occupied the same space as us. I learned about, and deeply feared, these mythical creatures within the first months of my family's move from Abadan to Jahrom when I was 11. It started with stories about the communal bathhouse near my grandfather's house. The bathhouse was an important space for people around me as I grew up. It was the center of activity and attention for the community. Adults got together there not only to get clean but also to interact, exchange gossip, and make sense of what was going on in the community. Until I was thirteen or fourteen years old, I went there with adults. In the previous visits to Jahrom, until I was four or five years old, I had gone there with my mother and other adult women. Later on, at least until I was 15 or 16, I went to the bathhouse with my male uncles and cousins and sometimes with my father.

For years, using the bathhouses was more of a necessity during the winters, when it wasn't practical to warm up water to bathe at home. My mother bathed my baby brother that way. When it was warm, we had the well water and the reservoir for bathing. Often, when I was roaming around the orchards with my cousins, we jumped in the small pool of water under the running electric or diesel pump. But still, the bathhouse had its uses and importance for us every now and then. When a more modern and more private bathhouse with private spaces was constructed in my last two years of high school, I stopped using the communal bathhouse altogether and opted for that option, despite higher fees.

The bathhouse had another meaning for me and other children. It was a scary place that we avoided in the dark at all costs, especially if there was nobody around. The door to the bathhouse opened into a narrow lane that snaked through a row of earthen walls connected to each other, each being the back wall of a house. That was the lane I walked or biked through from the main street to my grandparents' house on the other side of the block. The bathhouse was closed at night, engulfed in full darkness, as was the narrow lane where it was located. I learned early on that the Jen frequented that place at night. When passing through that lane, the only feasible way to grandfather's house, I would bike fast or run, silently whispering God's name, which supposedly kept them away.

The bathhouse was a large domed structure, partly sunken below ground level. Leading to the narrow dirt lane a few steps higher. A solid wooden door mounted on handmade iron hinges opened inward to a small alcove. A few steps made of bricks took you down to another alcove that connected to the main bath area with a stone-covered floor and two narrow stone benches on each side. On one side of the communal area, there was a large opening to a huge tub that people would soak in. Next to it, up a few stairs, was another narrow opening to the hot-water reservoir, built on top of a warming tunnel that was reached from outside the bathhouse.

On the outside, the heating tunnel was tucked away in a dark, narrow walkway perpendicular to the lane, on the side of the bathhouse. It sank in the ground next to the big earthen dome. It was a dark and scary place to pass by, even during the day. The bathkeeper burned wood in that opening to warm the water. A few years later, when modernity took over, he installed an oil furnace in that space to do the job.

The big dome on the top center of the bathhouse was made of bricks, plastered with mud and straw on the outside. You could see the raised dome from inside, with four small glass panes all the way up on the sides that had turned opaque over time. The dome covered the general sitting area and soaking tub. A smaller dome covered the raised hot water reservoir on the side of the general area. The light from the glass panes of the large dome did not penetrate this space. It was pitch dark and scary, day or night, and was one of the spaces inside the bathhouse that I avoided at all costs, even when there were many adults in the main sitting area.

Some people would bring their own towels and the reddish cloth covers (*loung*) that they tied around their waist down to their knees to cover their private parts. Others would ask for them upon arrival, for a fee. When you entered the bathhouse, down the stairs, you were in the changing room that had small cubicles with cloth privacy curtains at their openings. Upon undressing and putting on the *loung* around your waist, you would walk to the general bath area under the dome and sit on the ground or on one of the two side stone benches if it was unoccupied. The reddish skirt-like cloth covered the middle part of our body down to the knees, held by tying it around our waist. And, of course, it was common modesty to avoid looking at others while they were sitting, if they were careless by chance!

People were washed by the two men who worked there. One of them brought water from the hot tub and poured it over the customers every now and then. Meanwhile, the other man washed the customers with a handmade rough loofah and scrubbed the soles of their feet with a black, smooth volcanic rock. Opposite to the raised soaking tub, a narrow opening led to three stalls made of bricks that the light of the main dome did not reach. That was where people stood and put *vajebee* on to remove their pubic hair. *Vajebee*—literally translated as "sanctioned" or "required"—was a locally made compound for removing pubic hair, a crude form of today's Nair. It was made with calcium oxide (*aahak*), a highly abrasive substance used in building materials, and had a foul smell. As I grew up, I learned that it was considered sinful to have long pubic hair. Removing it every few weeks became a habit. When I was fifteen or sixteen, I learned the hard way that *vajebee* would burn your skin if left on too long. I learned to be vigilant and wash it as soon as the hair could be pulled easily. To facilitate that, a small tub was frequently filled by the workers for people to take water from, using small handmade metal bowls.

After the move to Jahrom in 1961, it took me a long time to learn everything about the bathhouse and the rituals associated with it and to be comfortable enough to go there by myself. But learning to fear it took only a week or two when I heard all the stories about the Jen sightings there. As time passed, I learned many other things about the Jen and the other places that they had been seen, each adding to the repertoire of my fears. I also learned to avoid them if I could, or call God's name if I was caught in a situation in which they could be present. That learning curve was steep since the places I lived at during the first three years of moving to Jahrom were all near one or more places where these creatures had been seen or heard after dark. The bathhouse was perhaps the scene of the most frequent and large-scale sightings of Jen. There were stories of hearing them in the bathhouse at night or even hearing music from their wedding celebrations there on some midnights.

I learned that the Jen was a society of malevolent yet playful beings that, with one exception (having goat-like hoofs, rather than feet), looked like us, living invisibly among people and out of their way. Although they lived among us, sharing the same space, every now and then they would appear in certain places, for reasons unknown. Often, they were out late at night, when everyone was indoors and presumably asleep. Sightings were reported only by people who were outside for some reason late at night. And that was how a Jen family was seen by Uncle Nasrollah at the bottom of the *goochoo* (a long semi-tunnel opening in the ground next to irrigation wells—more on this later) late one night, when he was a teenager almost a century ago. "A man, a woman, and a child Jen, looking exactly like us, with a lantern in the man's hand, going down, gesturing for me to follow." That's how he told the story about his own youth. The common belief was that the Jen lived at the bottom of the *goochoos*. So, seeing them going down the steep path was not surprising. Everyone believed that the Jen were always alarmed when discovered. This family of Jen apparently disappeared when my uncle, who had run away, gathered the courage to go back to look again, from far away.

Then there was the story my mother told us about the time she was a teenager. One evening she had to go get milk for a sick family member from a house that had a milking cow and sold milk, about a mile away. On the way back, in the dark, she had to pass a *goochoo* near my grandparents' house. She saw a group of Jen celebrating there, signaling her to join them when they saw her. Mother told us that the women were wearing bright, new, traditional pants for a wedding. Scared, she ran home as fast as she could. It happened that her sister, my Aunt Vaghar, had sewn exactly the same colorful, traditional pants for a wedding party, on commission. In the morning, as the story goes, "when Vaghar opened the trunk that the new pants were put in the night before, she found them dirty and worn. That is how mean and playful the Jen were sometimes!"

Ironically, when I was a teenager, none of the stories about Jen deterred my father from renting the bathhouse late in the evening after work and taking my brother and me there. My father had a bread bakery on the main street of the town, past the Mosalla Square. His second in command in the bakery, Mr. Rameshkhah, was a short, muscular man with a thin mustache who had been a wrestler before. The bakery had three or four other workers, two of them quite young, teenagers who had dropped out of school or had to support a family. Once in a while, my father and Mr. Rameshkhah would rent the bathhouse in the evening after work, maybe from eight to ten p.m. The bathhouse was closed at that time, but the bathkeeper would come and unlock the door for us. I didn't know of anyone else who rented it like that. I can imagine that the scary stories had an advantage: it was cheap to rent it at that time. The two of them, me, my brother, and one or two workers (one of whom was my cousin) would go there. The bathkeeper would leave oil lanterns for us to illuminate the main area. Knowing that the Jen would not materialize where a group of people were present did not help my fear, especially if I had to go fetch hot water from the side reservoir, a completely dark and scary covered space. Repeating God's name was always my only recourse to ward the Jen off!

It didn't take me much time to learn that in addition to the bathhouse, Jen also lived in or frequented the *goochoo* (a weird short form in the local dialect to denote *gaav-chah*, literally translated as cow-well). *Goochoos* were mystical, dark, damp, and scary to me, even during the day. They were in a long stretch of dug earth, sloping down from the surface, open in the upper part and like a cave in the bottom, way down. They were about fifty or sixty yards long, sometimes more, gradually sinking into the earth to a depth of ten or more yards. Like some others, the

goochoo in Grandfather's orchards had an opening on the side of the bottom cave that led to a series of excavated dirt stairs going all the way to almost the bottom of a rectangular well about ten by fifteen feet in size. It was called *toonel* (tunnel). Down at the bottom of the dark *toonel* was an earthen platform that you could stand on. The electric pump sat on that platform. From there, you could look up the well and see the blue sky of Jahrom. Looking down, you could see water, with a reflection of the sky and the columns that perched on the top of the well. These columns were a remnant of the not-so-distant past when water was pulled out of the well with an ox going down the *goochoo*, pulling a rope connected to a huge bucket. Since the length of the *goochoo* depended on how deep the well had to be, I can imagine that they had become longer and deeper with the passing of time. Although the water was pumped out with electric pumps when I was a teenager, *goochoo*s, and oxen were still used for digging new wells or for pulling dirt and rocks from the bottom of the current ones to deepen them as the groundwater level receded each year due to widespread pumping.

In previous decades, perhaps centuries, each day a man would walk the ox down the slope of the *goochoo* with a thick rope attached to the animal's back and neck with a V-shaped contraption. One side of the rope went over a spiked wooden wheel that was installed right above the well, maybe ten to twelve feet high, between two big columns made of mud bricks. A huge black rubber bucket was attached to the rope that went down the well, all the way to the water, getting submerged under its own weight, filling. When pulled up, the bucket was caught by another man standing on the top by the side of the well, emptying it into the small reservoir of water that fed a stream going to the orange, palm, and lemon trees surrounding the well. This was done repeatedly all day, again and again.

Late in my teen years, modernity was gradually taking over by adding electric pumps to wells. Most goochoo remained but were transformed by adding tunnels in the bottom of some to reach the electric pump that was suspended on beams above the water level. The oxen also remained, used for digging new wells or lifting dirt from the bottom of the old ones. And, of course, the stories about the Jen and the goochoo remained as well, perhaps with the intensity and believability of the distant past centuries. Even though logically I questioned these stories, emotionally I was impacted. I never felt comfortable being near a *goochoo*, especially if I was alone late in the day.

Even before I set foot in my new elementary school in Jahrom, I learned that the Jen could be tricky pranksters. They stole things, but returned them most of the time. If they were upset, they stole babies. Everyone had a story of some baby that was stolen, often because the mother had thrown boiling water out, burning Jen babies who were playing there, invisible to humans.

Both of my parents, but more strongly my mother, believed in Jen. My mother always recited God's name to warn the Jen children from harm whenever she poured hot water in the sink or on the ground. She always cited God's name to warn the Jen when stepping into a dark room before turning the light on. Believe it or not, more than half a century later, I sometimes find myself doing the same in my head when I enter a dark place.

Like many in her generation, Mother's philosophy of life was simple: there were us, and there were the Jen, coexisting in harmony—at least most of the time. I guess that being aware of and comfortable with one's place in such a world every moment of life made that world predictable and meaningful. Perhaps the stories of Jen were simple cultural attempts to teach us about the possibility of coexistence and harmony in life, even with the unknown? Lost these days, also as a casualty of modernity?

Did I believe in the existence of Jen when I was a child? I wish I had a simple answer. There was a duality in what I believed about Jen. At some level, cognitively, despite what everybody believed, I knew they did not exist. I could not find any evidence to the contrary. But at an emotional level, they were real. I could not resolve the constant conflict. Regardless of what I believed then, the Jen definitely impacted my daily life during childhood and even for years after. I was aware of them, fearing the places that they presumably lived or showed up in, trying to avoid these places. Even though my uncertain belief in their existence waned over time, that fear persisted outside of my conscious control for years. Deep inside, at some unconscious level, the fear pops up every time I enter a pitch-dark space.

7

Climbing Out of the Box

Being from a large family has many advantages and a few disadvantages. A disadvantage was that there was little personal space, living in one or two rooms during my childhood and adolescence. On the other hand, we never got bored, because there was always something to do with our siblings. Ghodrat—my brother who is three years younger—and I were avid chess players. We did not have a chess set at home, but our school library had sets that we borrowed to bring home with us regularly until we made our own set from bread dough.

There were lots of other activities to keep Ghodrat and me busy when we were kids. We used a six-volt electricity converter to power little nightlights that we installed around the house. The popular science magazine *Daneshmand* (Scientist) always had some new ideas to build on. So did our physics textbooks. We made magnets, buzzers, and rudimentary speakers with that converted electricity. We even had a radio station. Ghodrat was a true electronics wizard! Working in a radio repair shop one summer also helped. He made a shortwave radio using blueprints in the books and a science magazine. He would play music on the radio whenever we were home. That was probably the first Radio Jahrom, although my guess is that its reach was not beyond our block. In the mid-1960s, setting up a radio station was a serious offense for the notorious security service, Savak, that we all feared in our daily lives. "You will get arrested one of these days," Mother used to say, genuinely worried. But, given our age and inexperience, we often ignored the threat.

My sisters had their own clique. They played with each other whenever they were not helping Mother with daily chores. Even in my wildest dreams, I could not imagine that one day the inseparable little girls playing barefoot in dirt with ragged clothes (pictured below) would travel to and live in faraway places around the world. I will tell you more about how their world changed over time.

My three sisters in our yard in Jahrom in mid 1960's.

Living within a traditional family in a small rural mountain town, the world looked and felt small and simple in many ways, but drastically changed with every exposure to outsiders. For example, one day when I was in eighth grade, a classmate, who was also a friend from elementary school, brought some cigarettes to school. His brother had come home from Kuwait and brought them with him. In Persian, *Sa'lem* means healthy, and the cigarettes were called Salem. "These are good cigarettes! They smell like mint, and they don't make you sick," my friend told us. There were four of us who hung together during recess and sometimes before and after school. We were happy to accept the offer to share one or more "healthy" cigarettes among us and experiment with smoking outside of the school building. He would bring them to school every now and then, and we smoked in secret during the breaks. I started smoking sporadically with that experience

and continued in high school and even occasionally in college, even though I learned that Salem did not mean *sa'lem*!

Learning from books was another example of drastically changing as a result of exposure to the outside world. I was somewhat of a loner in my junior high years, spending most of my free time in the school library and playing chess after school with a few friends who were experienced in it. I was an avid reader. The school library was small, with about five hundred to eight hundred books in bookcases around a small room. We didn't have a librarian. The library was open an hour before and after school each day, and we could sign a book out via the school secretary. Soon, I had read many of the books in the library, borrowing one every few days, mostly translated classics. That's where I became familiar with names like Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Dickens, Kafka, Camus, Fanon, and many others, including Persian masters of literature, such as Hedayat, Ale-Ahmad, and others. With each book, my small world expanded by a little or a lot.

Eventually, recognized for my interest and scope of familiarity with the books, I was asked to function as a librarian during school days, an hour before and after classes. I was now in a position to advise other students about what to read, a role that I took very seriously, giving me a sense of pride and accomplishment.

During the summers, I read a book or two per week. I used to walk a long way to a bookstore in another neighborhood that rented books very inexpensively, charging by the week. A teacher had established a bookstore, adding book rental as a service to the community. I would walk to that bookstore late in the afternoon, sometimes with Ghodrat, and would exchange the previous rented book that I had read. Paying a rental fee per week, you could only keep one book at a time but could exchange it for another during that week. So, I often read two books with one weekly rental fee.

My interest in chess also expanded in junior high school. Ghodrat and I had been playing chess for some time, learning strategies from a thin paperback book that we had bought some time before. We did not have a chess set at home, since in Kooshkak, our neighborhood, it was considered taboo, like gambling. Some of the other neighborhoods in town weren't that strict. The school was more liberal than my community, so I could play with a few other students at school. At home, Ghodrat and I spent entire summers playing chess on the set that we built with dough. The pieces looked ugly but distinctive enough for us to play with. And we created multiple variations of the game; for example, one with two sets of pawns on each side, or one player having four knights (*asb*, meaning horse in Persian) and the other four bishops (*feel*, meaning elephant, in Persian).

In school, I played with a few other students, two of whom had an adult coach outside of school and were very good. The three of us were the winners of the chess competition at school, later played in the regional chess competition. We won that competition, with me in third place. That was another point of pride for me, although it got me in trouble at the end of eighth grade. My religious studies teacher was among those who considered chess *haram* (taboo). When I got a probationary failing grade in his class, requiring a retest at the end of the summer, I was convinced that my grade had something to do with chess. As I described before, I had to retake the religious studies test at the end of the summer before I could register for the ninth grade.

Until I graduated from high school in 1968, from many points of view, I had lived in a bubble: in a poor family living in a small, conservative, and religious community that could as well have existed in a previous century. This was the time of modernization and westernization in Iran and similar developing countries, but the material and psychological modernity that had partially

reached the big cities and perhaps was present in affluent families in town was not in my community. Almost the entire town, especially the poorer neighborhoods like mine, was connected by dirt roads, boxed by mud walls or walls made with mortar and rocks hauled from the nearby mountains. There was electricity, but it was erratic and expensive. In my neighborhood, houses had two wells, one for sewage and a deeper one for water (to be pulled by hand), sometimes within yards of each other.

From what I remember, life was simple, and most people I knew were content with what they had. For me, being engulfed in a large extended family had numerous advantages. I had a large support system I could count on if I needed anything. My family provided direction to daily life; we did a lot together. In retrospect, this was very comforting and also prevented confusion when the world didn't make sense to us children and youth. The flip side was the expectation for everyone to fit into traditional ways of living and thinking that had been practiced for decades. As I grew older, it became harder and harder for me to fit in. Expectations became more and more frustrating. I was increasingly learning about other ways of life through school, books, and shortwave radio.

Perhaps one of the first signs of revolt against the traditional ways of living was my reaction to what my father wanted me to become. As I mentioned before, during my entire childhood, my father would often tell me that he wanted me to switch from regular education to a professional religious school after I finished 8th grade. My early childhood education was heavily focused on preparing me to become an *Akhund* (Islamic cleric). As I described in Chapter 4, these preparations continued to some extent in later childhood, outside of the school. It wasn't until the end of my eighth grade that, after a major fight with my father, I told him that I was not willing to become an *akhond*. For days, he didn't speak to me, but gradually accepted my lack of enthusiasm.

At that time, since the end of elementary school, I had become increasingly interested in becoming a teacher. However, at the time of my fight with my dad, I wasn't even sure of that anymore. I let him know that day that my biggest dream was to get accepted to the Oil Industry Technical School in Abadan the following year and to move there.

My friction with my father about what I wanted to be in the future was the tip of a proverbial iceberg running through traditional Iranian communities like mine during the 1960s. Fatalism (the belief that we all lived according to what God wanted us to) was alive and well in my community and extended family, as it had been for years and decades. Young people's paths were largely defined within the confines of larger extended families. In sharp contradiction, however, there were also telltale signs of a drive among the youth to break away from that traditional path and among some in the older generation to provide escape routes through education. As a result of these social changes, children were being sent to school despite the strong need for their labor. An unquestioned effort in education was expected of us, and gradually, non-agriculture-related jobs were being pursued by the new generation of young adults. My maternal uncles Ali and Rajab were in this group, each hired by a bank on the far side of town. Two of my mother's female cousins finished high school and became teachers, providing respected female role models. Some of the other young adults traveled for long periods to work in the oil-rich Arab countries in the Persian Gulf region (especially Kuwait). My maternal uncles, Rasoul and Samad, were in that group, both working there as car mechanics.

Uncle Rajab's story is probably a good example of the push for life changes through education among the younger generation. When I moved to Jahrom to start my 6th grade, and in the year after, one of my tasks was to teach him how to read and write and do math. He wanted to take a

salaried job as a policeman, a guard, or something similar. But getting that kind of job required at least a sixth-grade diploma (certifying the completion of elementary school at that time). He had dropped out of school years before, but could take the sixth-grade tests and get a certificate to meet the requirements. After school and on weekends, we would sit in the orchard on the low wall that had formed when they stacked excavated rocks before they planted citrus trees and date palms.

That orchard was where Uncle Rajab spent most of his day, helping my grandfather in planting and maintaining orange, lemon, and date trees. Upon my arrival at the orchard after school, he would patiently sit down and read the sixth-grade textbooks with me or practice memorizing the multiplication table with my help. It was a great source of pride for both of us when he passed the test, got the certificate, and got hired as a security guard in a local bank.

Although I had lived in another city (Abadan) when I was younger, I still didn't know much about living in the world outside of my extended family and my small rural town of Jahrom when I finished junior high school, or in the following years. Except for a bus trip back to my birthplace, Abadan, to visit my uncles in 1963, and my stay with them for a year, I had not traveled anywhere. We did not have a car or a TV. One of my windows to the bigger world was my father's Rex shortwave radio, a big rectangular box with round dials on both sides. It had multiple bands that I could search, giving me access to numerous stations from around the world in different languages, most of which I could not understand. Throughout my high school years, I listened regularly to the BBC and other foreign stations that broadcast Persian programs. I also listened to English programs on Voice of America, Radio Canada International, Radio Germany (Deutsche Welle), and the like. My younger brother Ghodrat would often sit with me, listening. By the time I finished senior high, I was able to understand much of the English broadcasts by Voice of America and similar programs. Among the youth in my neighborhood and the larger community around us that I knew, Ghodrat and I were the only ones who were obsessed with virtual traveling and getting to understand the world through the short waves.

Khajeh-Naseer, the senior high school that I went to for tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades, was far from home, on the other side of town. Walking took a long time. Eventually, I bought a used bicycle. Those last years of high school were academically challenging. Students were in three academic branches: math, biological sciences, and literature. Few students chose the more challenging math route that I enrolled in—mostly those who were hoping to get accepted into universities, possibly in science and engineering programs. For some of the students in my cohort, senior high school was the place to prepare for the general entrance examination of the universities. I considered college the only way out of poverty, but it was an uncertain goal given the tough competition for admission and my lack of financial resources.

As I told you before, my first year of senior high school (ninth grade) was at Razi High School in Abadan. After that, I moved back to Jahrom for the next three years. Razi High had given me a broader perspective on life. More than ever before, I saw the gap between my socioeconomic and cultural background and the rest of the world. More than ever before, I realized that I could still excel and do better than most, if not all, despite their advantages and better resources. Upon my return to Jahrom, my friendship with a handful of classmates from other parts of town expanded that perspective and strengthened my aspirations and sense of efficacy.

Among these friends, two were notable influences. Both lived far away on the other side of the town. Rostam's father was a retired senior military officer from the north of Iran, living with his family in the orchard that he had developed, from which he received some income. Rostam's

family was more affluent and more modern than mine, both materially and psychologically, with two adult sons living abroad. Rostam himself had traveled much in the country. Owrang, my second friend, had lost his father sometime before. He and his mother lived in a small, modest home on the outskirts of town, far from my house. Regardless of the socioeconomic and cultural differences between Rostam on one side and Owrang and I on the other, the three of us were very close.

One day, when the three of us were together after school, Rostam suggested that we go to the barbershop and shave our heads, just to be different from others at school. We first laughed at the idea but eventually liked it. On a whim, we did that. From that day on, we were known as the "three baldies" by everyone around! We studied together and supported each other academically. We created our charity group to help the poor. We also met with the mayor of the town to secure his endorsement before collecting donations from businesses and individuals. We delivered new and used shoes and clothes to children in poor areas before the start of winter, especially to a village near Jahrom called Heidar Aabaad.

Most days, in and out of school, the 'three baldies' could be seen together around town. Our group of three had a couple of other common characteristics: We were heavily engaged in learning English, and we were close to the Peace Corps volunteer in town, Mr. Ray. Although he was older, we considered him a friend, inviting him to our homes regularly. Often, he shared stories about his hometown in New York, and we told him about our own experiences. Our English was getting better and better, and since he didn't speak much Persian, we were his translators from time to time. Owrang, Rostam, and I frequently talked about going to college. We studied hard to prepare for the national entrance examinations that were conducted yearly. In the spring of 1968, I traveled to three places to take exams. After waiting anxiously for weeks, rejection by two of the three public universities which I had taken the examinations for crushed my spirit, leaving me in deep depression and anxiety for days while I was also waiting for the third university's admissions list.

Seeing my name on the published list of accepted students to Pahlavi University in Shiraz changed everything, including my future life trajectory. It also caused a happy uproar in my extended family and my close-knit neighborhood, suddenly changing the culture of the large community by charting optimistic options and expectations for thirty to fifty children and youth that surrounded us. It was now clear, by example, that it was possible to beat the odds and join the advantaged!

Despite all the excitement, for me going to college had two worrying financial implications that I had to wrestle with. One was that I would not immediately get a job to earn a salary and help the family. That had to wait for a few years. The other was that even though the tuition was free, I needed funds for food, books, and dormitory. Amid all the uncertainty about financial implications, my father strongly encouraged me to proceed and enroll.

In 1968, I moved to Shiraz and into the least expensive university-subsidized dormitory available. The department gave me a work-study stipend to assist the faculty in their research, easing some of my financial burden. Within three years, the next big accomplishment in the family happened: my brother, Ghodrat, got accepted to study electrical engineering, a field that was much more respected and prestigious than my psychology major (I had tried to get accepted in engineering but had not succeeded). Ghodrat's success was another source of pride for me. It also marked a path that other youth in the family and neighborhood got motivated to pursue in the next years.

Despite my maternal uncle's opposition and advice from some other conservative members of the extended family in mid 1960's, my sisters continued their education to high school, also uncommon in my neighborhood. There was no high school for girls in Kooshkak; they had to walk to another part of the town, miles away. At that time, I was married and had a job, living in Shiraz (about 3 hours away by car/bus). To ease some of the pressures on my sisters Zahra and Zohre, who were both in senior high school, I moved them to Shiraz. Jaleh, the youngest, who was in junior high school, continued in Jahrom. Despite all the obstacles, not only did all three finish high school, but they also went further, to college. Although she had never gone to school herself, Mother was a big driving force behind all this. During my childhood, many mothers in our neighborhood used to refer to their daughters as doomed (*pishooni siah*, which literally translates to "black forehead"), denoting their deprived place in the world. My sisters were at the forefront of changes that gradually happened in our extended family.

My acceptance to college in 1968 meant moving away and living by myself for the first time. I was anxious about moving to a big city. In contrast to rural Jahrom, especially my Kooshkak neighborhood, Shiraz was a different world, an urban center with movie theaters, a large university, and a few smaller professional schools. Except in the highly traditional (old) sections of the city, women did not wear a *chador*. You could see women drivers everywhere on the streets, driving to work or around town. The prospects of living in a bustling place like that were both exciting and anxiety-producing, especially given the meager financial resources available to me and my family. Like everyone else, I had specified my top three desired majors; psychology was third on the list. Sometimes I try to envision what would have happened if I had been accepted into the medical school or as an engineering major, my top two choices. Both were highly competitive, attracting a large number of applicants, because they had more prestige and future earning potential than psychology or social sciences. With this, and also with my recent failure to get into the Petroleum College in Abadan, my dream of becoming an engineer was now dead.

As I was getting ready to start my college education, a new source of anxiety started clouding my skies: uncertainty about the prospects of my future support for the family, even if I finished college. I did not have an answer to an important question that would not leave my mind: *What the heck are you going to do when you finish college with a psychology degree*? Although I could not find an answer, I knew that the odds of breaking out of poverty had substantially improved.

8

Anticipation

Within a month of being accepted into the university, I moved to Shiraz, starting to live in a cheap and noisy dorm in the middle of town, next to a movie theater. One of the advantages of growing up in a large family was that I was used to living in crowded spaces with minimal resources. The noisy dorm and dilapidated building did not bother me much.

Pahlavi University had adopted English as its academic language. It was in partnership with the University of Pennsylvania, with a few exchange students from each attending the other. All new admits were expected to start in the summer so that they could attend an intensive English-language training for six weeks. The expectation was that by the fall semester, we would be able to study English texts in our classes. I was from a small town, with parents who had never gone to elementary school, much less to university, so I did not have a clue about what to expect or do, and how to survive among the relatively upscale student scene of the university. The co-ed environment of the university was also alien to me. Simply put, I felt like the proverbial fish out of water!

My old friend Rostam was better in English than I, had better financial resources at his disposal, and also was less shocked by the sudden culture change. He rented an apartment by himself and was socially distant from me. However, I found out that there were others who were like me, and soon I found myself in a new social circle. Among them, there were two whose names you are going to see multiple times in this book: Manijeh and Akbar. Akbar was an economics major sharing a dorm room with me through much of my college years. You will find out later that he married my sister a few years after we graduated from college. Manijeh was a psychology major in my cohort who shared four or five classes with me every year. As I will tell you shortly, we were co-workers on a large grant-funded project in the department. I will also tell you later that I married her about two years after we both graduated from college. My friendship with both Akbar and Manijeh started in the English classes that we all took in the summer preceding our freshman year.

That summer experience was tough but rewarding. By the end of the term, I understood English much better and was able to read the textbooks. Regardless, the fall semester proved to be challenging. Taking five courses, all with American textbooks and English-speaking instructors, was hard. Biology was probably the hardest of all. The first 20 or 30 pages of my textbooks were covered all around and between the lines with my Persian translations of the words in the text. But, as the book proceeded, my side notes in Persian became thinner and thinner. By the end of the book, the pages were almost clean of these translated notes. The fall semester and those that followed were all successful. Soon, I was recognized among my classmates as a person to go to for answers to questions in courses such as abnormal psychology, statistics, or genetics. By the third

year, I sometimes tutored others who needed help in these courses.

The number of students admitted to each academic major at Pahlavi University was small. There were thirty or thirty-five of us in a close-knit first-year psychology cohort. However, our courses were with many other majors, from biology and pre-med to economics and Persian literature. Most of the courses that I took in the first two years were shared with students in social and health sciences, gradually transitioning to courses limited to psychology students.

From my first semester at the university, I got a job as a student worker, helping the faculty with research projects. I stapled questionnaires, coded surveys, and created tables for the results. Gradually, I started taking a bigger role in research projects, helping in data collection and data analysis. I was in my third year when I was assigned to a large research project on adolescent attitudes and aspirations that was being conducted by one of my professors, Dr. Mehryar. If I want to identify one pivot point that shaped my entire professional and personal life, it was that event and that professor's mentorship. Not only did I learn how to do research, but my experience also opened new doors in the years that followed. I will share details of these opportunities later, starting with being hired in 1974, two years after my graduation, as the project manager for a larger study on motives for childbearing.

During the second year of my undergraduate studies, I started working closely with Manijeh, who was also hired for the adolescent attitudes project. One day in the third year of undergraduate studies, my friend and classmate Nouri and I were talking after one of our psychology classes. "Why don't you and Manijeh start a psychology club for us?" he asked. "There are a number of us who would join right away." Curious, I asked, "Why don't you do it yourself?" His response was, "If there is anybody who will be taken seriously, it is the two of you. None of us will get any traction." Manijeh and I established that club, which attracted a sizable number of students within weeks. During the school year, we organized a weekly workshop in psychoanalysis with Dr. Urdoobady, a British-educated author and practitioner in that specialty, which was well attended by the club members.

That workshop, lasting almost a year, had both personal and professional impacts on me. At a personal level, it gradually changed the nature of my relationship with Manijeh, with whom I was spending a lot of time. The workshop also helped shape my academic self-confidence. I felt like an expert in Freudian theory (an important sub-specialty in psychology at that time) to such a degree that I decided to write my first paper for possible publication. The paper itself was an attempt to analyze The Blind Owl by the well-known Persian writer Sadeq Hedayat. My paper argued that the book was a demonstration case for the Oedipal complex because a desired woman, the ethereal girl, was transformed by the end of the book into the writer's description of his own mother[5].

In retrospect, that manuscript met many of today's standards. But when it was finished, I started questioning its merit and value to the point that I did not submit it to a journal for publication. Although that experience put a dent in my literal and scholarly self-confidence for a while, it provided a new lens to see the world of academic ideas differently. Acquisition of the lens was a major milestone in my professional life. It emerged out of several realizations, two of which I describe below.

From one point of view, attempting to write the paper was the start of a new worldview that started to grow and eventually dominated my thinking: I started looking beyond topics and descriptions to find new overarching explanations for ideas, events, and behaviors that were conveyed in them. The emphasis here is on the word 'new,' denoting a breaking from dominant

thought frameworks of the time that I was learning about. Gradually, I learned that deviating from dominant theoretical ideas was a good thing since many new philosophical stances and social science theories had been constructed that way for a long time. Much of my later writing in social psychology and research methodology in the next decades was shaped by that eclectic and holistic worldview.

The second impact of that failed endeavor to write for publication was that by making the attempt, I gave myself permission to think like and write as an expert. Until that point, there were scholars, experts, and theorists with big ideas and big names that I read about in my books, and it was me as a consumer of these ideas. There was no resemblance or commonality between them and me. Permitting myself to be one of them started a trend of theorizing, creative writing, and publishing that bloomed in the next decades. It took a few more years, a lot more reading and writing, and more systematic research experiences for me to gain enough confidence to submit my next paper (s) for publication. That first unpublished paper itself also changed as I looked at it through new theoretical and scientific lenses. Becoming interested in alternative cultural interpretations of Oedipal stories, I questioned my approach and the methodology used in that paper.

When I started my undergraduate studies, the salary from the work-study job was not enough to cover my expenses. Now and then, I got a little help from my father. Knowing how tight the financial situation of the family was, I felt very guilty every time he sent money and returned it a few times. After the first year, I found other temporary jobs that helped me survive. One was teaching in an adult literacy program designed for university employees. These were the gardeners, janitorial staff, and other workers who could not read or write. A few times each week, they came to the College of Engineering (a central location easily accessible by bus) after work and sat patiently for two hours in my classroom to learn how to read elementary school-level books. For every student who passed the reading test at the end of the term, I got a set amount of money, which for me was like a small fortune! Adding to my sense of accomplishment was the knowledge that all of my students passed the test, each receiving a cash bonus at work as well.

Another job in my third and fourth years of college was teaching British missionaries how to read the New Testament in Persian. These were nurses in the Christian Hospital, serving in Shiraz for some time. One of their expected tasks, I was told, was to read in Farsi from the New Testament at Sunday service. Twice a week I had one-on-one teaching sessions in the evenings. These nurses were very attractive, kind, and sociable. As a young college student, working with these attractive women was both rewarding and difficult. I was shy. I also had to make an effort not to show that I was physically attracted to one of them, a tall blond woman a few years older than me. On and off, we had conversations in a mixture of English and Persian about different topics, including religion. I liked my job, and I looked forward to it impatiently. Getting paid well for it was a nice bonus!

Years later, when I thought about that experience, it occurred to me that the job had long-term effects on me that I did not recognize at that time. One was that it gave me a chance to interact with people from very different cultural backgrounds, languages, religions, and worldviews. I learned something new in each of my interactions with the nuns, expanding my own worldview and attitudes. The job also gave me an opportunity to learn about Christianity, both from reading and teaching the content and in conversations with my students. My previous knowledge and beliefs were based on various sources: The re-interpreted Old Testament stories of my childhood, Islamic teachings about Jesus as a prophet, critical viewpoints in my religious studies, and

whatever exposure I had had in my readings of general literature, for example, The Gadfly and Karl Marx. I was trying hard to reconcile the concept and definition of God among the four religions that I knew about (Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). As time went by, I became increasingly aware of the inconsistency between different religions in this respect, fueling my skepticism about the Truth (with a capital T). As decades went by, I continued my search for that Truth and have developed a more universal, cosmic, and science-oriented belief about God.

Going back to earthly matters, the jobs helped a lot, but I still could not afford to live in the prestigious dorms that were on the university residential complex (interestingly named *Baghe Eram,* meaning The Garden of Paradise). I was sharing a room with my friend Akbar Aghajanian—now a professor emeritus of the University of North Carolina system—in a noisy building that was used by the university as an off-site, cheap housing option right next to the Sa'di movie theater in town. Every now and then, both of us had to skip dinner because we could not make it to the subsidized university cafeteria before closing, and we could not afford to eat out. Movies with our friends and other activities that needed money were rare. In the second summer, Akbar and I tried to move to another dorm that was located downtown but was slightly cheaper and quieter. There was no vacancy, but we offered to empty the big storage room on the second floor that was full of student belongings left for the summer. For two days, we moved many suitcases and other articles from the second floor to a smaller space downstairs.

That big room was so large that the university allocated it to house four residents. So, we shared it with two other friends who were also tired of the old, noisy dorm. Akbar and I moved in right away; the other two roommates joined us later that summer. We stayed in that large four-person room until graduation. In that room, we cooked dinner camping style on a Primus kerosene burner, had an icebox, studied for exams, and even housed a visitor overnight every now and then.

I told you about Manijeh before. She and I became close friends over time. Sometimes we took weekend hikes in the mountains around Shiraz with my three roommates, Manijeh's brother Ahmad (who was an engineering student), and another friend who sometimes came with his girlfriend. Sometimes, we would picnic in the foothills or the surrounding areas. Often one or two other girls joined us as well. With that, working on the research project, taking the same classes, and running the Psychology Club workshop, Manijeh and I spent a lot of time together. On a few occasions, she, Ahmad, and one or two of my roommates went with me to Jahrom. We all stayed in my parents' house. My parents and siblings all knew Manijeh and loved her.

Among my memories of college years in Shiraz are stories told by other students about parties that they attended, but my friends and I were never exposed to that scene. There were loudmouth characters who told stories about their old high schools that had big labs, tennis courts, and music rooms. They told stories about big houses with their own rooms and about traveling to all kinds of places, like the beaches on the Caspian Sea up in the north. To many of them, Tehran was the center of civilization, and those from other places in the country were, simply put, *dehati* (villagers). No one told stories of dilapidated high schools, impoverished families, and bare-minimum lifestyles.

Other memories of my college years are centered around political censorship, resistance, and suppression. The Shah's secret service, SAVAK, which was established, trained, and maintained by the CIA and Mossad, was everywhere. Once in a while, there were student demonstrations, which were brutally suppressed by the soldiers. Routinely, students were arrested for speaking up

against the dictatorship. Once or twice a year, the army was called to the university to beat up students who dared to get together and demand reforms. On two occasions, I was among these students, running away when the riot police arrived. One time, I ran into a narrow, dead-end lane but escaped arrest or beatings because a homeowner pulled me in the door that opened in the small alcove that I was hiding in.

One day, getting off the bus downtown to go to our dorm, Akbar and I saw a crowd outside. There had been an explosion in our dorm, and the police prevented us from getting close for hours. We all sat on the sidewalk across the street, waiting to be allowed in. When we were allowed to go in that night, we found out that the explosion had occurred in the room across from us in the hall. The doors were blown away, and that room was covered with blood. We were told later that our neighbors were members of the Mujahedeen group, who made a bomb that exploded. Mujahedeen was an underground Islamist resistance group engaged in fighting the government of the Shah at that time. One of the two students in that room was a psychology student I knew well. He was a shy and very nice guy, wearing a well-trimmed beard. He was known among us for his honesty and progressive political ideology.

The explosion opened the door for SAVAK to investigate all of us who lived across from or next to that room or knew the residents. Each of us was individually interrogated about our activities, how well we knew the students in that room, and a variety of other issues that were totally irrelevant to the explosion. I knew the psychology student quite well and had been seen with him around our classes on many occasions. But the interrogations ended without getting me in trouble. Eventually, life went back to "normal," but we were always very careful about what we said in our room, suspicious that we were being monitored.

Perhaps like many others from impoverished backgrounds, attending an upscale college not only provided future opportunities to escape poverty but also became a space for my psychological transformation. I gradually learned about a world that was different—very different—from what I had lived in, one that was not readily accessible to me, given all the odds of the time. I learned about inequality at a different scale than I had experienced, but I didn't know the extent of it outside my small town and extended family. I was also getting exposed to highly diverse cultures and ideas, both within my student groups and the philosophical and academic worldviews of my professors, some foreign and others graduates of prestigious doctoral programs abroad. It is safe to say that by the time I graduated from college, I was even further away from the traditional culture that I was coming from.

College also gave me a new feeling of self-efficacy. I was proud of surpassing the more privileged students academically. I was well-recognized among my peers for my knowledge of psychology, social sciences, statistics, and genetics. But, despite all of that and all the accomplishments in my courses and academic areas outside of class, I felt socially out of place most of the time at Pahlavi University. I didn't have the cultural and psychological experience to fit the majority culture or the financial resources to participate in social activities with them.

The result was that I devoted all my time to studying. I took the maximum number of hours allowed every semester and summer, and I did well in my courses. Worrying about family finances, I finished my degree program in three and a half years and left to start my mandatory military service before the official graduation ceremonies for my cohort. The mandatory service was a hurdle I had to jump over before I could start a job.

I left Shiraz late in 1971 for my assigned military training in Tabriz, a cold and snowy city far away in the northwest of Iran. I'd had some training during the summers at the army base in

Shiraz. The Tabriz army base trained college graduates to become officers. Graduating as a second lieutenant after a few months of intensive training, I was assigned to an armored (tanks) division near the town of Dezful in the south, not very far from the border with Iraq. Unlike most of the career officers in the army base, I did not rent a place in town. Instead, I shared a room in the Officers' Club inside the base with a career first lieutenant for the rest of my two-year draft. The Officer's Club had a limited number of rooms and an on-site cafeteria that we ate at whenever we were not on duty. Dezful was a small town on the outskirts of the huge military base. Except for some weekends when I went for a walk along the river and a meal in town, I didn't have anything to do outside of the army base.

There were three interrelated roles expected of me in my military service in Dezful. On one hand, I was one of the designated psychological welfare officers for the base. That role was mainly ceremonial and public relations oriented, to handle official communication with families of injured/deceased personnel, quite rare during my service. My second role was to help run a tank unit with about one hundred personnel. Among my shared duties was getting the unit ready and on its way in case of a drill (or, once, an actual full-scale deployment to the border with Iraq, ready for battle) and, on a twice-per-week rotation, supervising the eight-hour day or night guard duty.

The third and perhaps most interesting role, at least in retrospect, was to serve as the occasional translator for the commander whenever an American training officer was on the base. That role included participation in formal dinners with the top brass to mediate the conversations between the commander and the visitor(s). Needless to say, I felt totally out of place at these dinner events. However, in addition to opportunities to practice my English in non-academic settings, my cultural knowledge grew due to exposure to ways of life and thinking that were very different from mine. Up to that point, my exposure had been within educational contexts. Military context and non-academic individuals were quite different. That role also made me aware of how the highest-ranked office of the Iranian army behaved like subordinates of American military advisers.

While living in Dezful, I had kept in touch with Manijeh by mail and a few times by telephone via the city telecommunication center, since she had a telephone at home. She had graduated and moved back home to her parents in Khorramshahr, about a four-hour bus ride from where I was. My uncles lived in Abadan, a neighboring town. Every month or so, I was able to take two days off and go to Abadan to visit them and also take the shuttle to Khoramshahr to visit Manijeh for a few hours in her house. On some of these visits, if the weather was good, we went for a long walk along the Karoon River, getting dinner or snacks from the street vendors along the way.

On two holidays, I traveled to see my family in Jahrom, almost thirteen hours by bus from the base. During one of those visits, my mother talked to me about my plans with Manijeh. I told her that I was unsure. "Moreover," I told her, "I don't have anything—not even the prospects of a job yet." She didn't think that was important. "She is a great girl. Don't lose the opportunity," she said. Before leaving for Dezful, I promised her to think about it seriously. In my last months of military service, since my parents were not able to travel, I asked my uncles to visit Manijeh's family in Khorramshahr with me to formally ask her parents for her hand, per custom.

Manijeh and I got married in her house in 1973, a few weeks before the end of my military service. It was a small ceremony, including our parents and siblings, uncles, and aunts. I had been given a few days off my service for the wedding. So, I went back to Dezful two days afterward. When my military service ended, Manijeh and I both moved to Shiraz and rented a place to live. It

was the first floor of a house near downtown, with the landlord living on the second floor. I took a job at the Population Center, a newly established research institute affiliated with Pahlavi University, directed by my old mentor, Dr. Mehryar. Manijeh was also hired to help on grant-funded research projects. Both of us enrolled at the university to get our master's degrees in psychology, taking two courses per semester.

Now that we lived about a four-hour bus ride from my parents and siblings, we would visit them every few weeks. My parents also came to visit every now and then, staying with us for a night each time. Life was gradually developing a stable and predictable tempo. With my job, I was able to financially help the family. Ghodrat was an engineering student in Shiraz. We visited frequently. When Akbar (my old roommate and friend) also finished his military service and returned to Shiraz, he too was hired by the Population Center as a demographer to help with research projects.

In the Pahlavi Population Center, I was in charge of two large research projects on motives for childbearing. Both were designed under Dr. Mehryar's supervision and funded by grants in collaboration with the Carolina Population Center in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. In my second year of work, the data were collected and analyzed on one of these projects. The Iranian Psychological Association was meeting in Isfahan that year. I submitted a paper based on the results of one of the projects, and it was accepted for presentation. The center bought airplane tickets for me to attend the conference.

It was 1974; I was a twenty-five-year-old college graduate and had never seen an airport or been on an airplane! I was apprehensive, but I was excited about the learning experience. I was also excited and anxious about my first presentation in front of a large audience of experts. Regardless of the novelty and challenges, the Isfahan trip substantially boosted my self-esteem. The presentation went well, and I had a few one-on-one meetings with known national scholars in psychology and social sciences. Akbar also presented successfully in that conference. Almost overnight, we had become recognized as junior members of a very elite academic group!

The trip, presentation, and the research report that was published as a one-hundred-page monograph gave me a new sense of efficacy in multiple areas. Akbar and I were now heavily engaged social researchers, each with a cadre of students working for us. We were in touch with visiting researchers from the US, who also taught at the university. Gradually, we became motivated to seek doctoral studies, even though it was not financially possible for either of us. We talked to several faculty and visiting scholars about that, learning about three sources of support. One was through international research organizations that collaborated with the center. Another was through the university itself; it was in the process of allocating funds to support doctoral students who would return and serve as future faculty. The third was to seek assistantships from universities in the US and elsewhere.

Akbar, Manijeh, and I talked about these possibilities often, hopeful that one of these routes might work out for us. In preparation, we took the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) and GRE (Graduate Record Examination) tests at the American Cultural Center in Shiraz. We applied to multiple universities in the US, Australia, and Canada that seemed to have big programs and resources to support doctoral student researchers. Within months, I had multiple admissions to universities in the U.S. and Canada, each with some modest financial support. However, the support was not enough to make it possible for Manijeh and me to travel and live abroad.

Meanwhile, upon getting admitted to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1975, I

applied for and was granted a Pahlavi University employee scholarship. That scholarship was a collaborative program of the Pahlavi University and the Carolina Population Center in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and included travel expenses. Although the decision to accept the scholarship seemed easy, imagining the consequences was stressful. Accepting it meant leaving everyone behind at a time when they needed me and Manijeh the most. With our help, my family's finances had gotten a little better. Two of my sisters and four younger brothers were still in school. Manijeh was worried about her elderly parents, who were living in Khoramshahr. We had talked about this moment for months, but I don't think we were ready when the prospects of financial support in the U.S. materialized.

Akbar was also successful in getting a doctoral scholarship following his admission to the doctoral program in sociology at Duke University in North Carolina. Another big development occurred while all of these changes were in progress: Akbar proposed to my sister Zahra. The initial discussions and the meetings between the two families happened before the summer. In June, they got married in my rental house, in a small and intimate setting. His immediate family, including parents, sisters, aunts, and uncles, drove from Isfahan. My parents and siblings came from Jahrom. A few common friends were also included. A month later, Manijeh and I left for the US. Akbar and Zahra left a few weeks after us.

In July of 1975, Manijeh and I took our second-ever trip on an airplane, from Shiraz to Tehran, then to New York. While waiting in Tehran airport for a few hours in the middle of the night, I went through all that had happened in my life. About eight years before, I had moved out of Jahrom, a small rural town in southern Iran, from a family mired in poverty living in a low-literacy context. With that move, I had entered a different world that was itself changing fast, facing many socio-cultural and economic controversies. I had struggled with these changes, largely adjusted to the culture shocks, and had been able to establish a stable base in Shiraz for myself and my siblings. Zahra was married there and was also leaving for the U.S. within a few weeks. Ghodrat had married and was remaining in Shiraz, but I was not sure how much support he could provide to my parents. I was amazed at the enormity of changes in my life and my family's. But I knew that even more drastic changes were coming up, simultaneously presenting challenges and new opportunities.

Waiting anxiously in Tehran airport in the early morning hours, the reality was setting in: I was really on my way to Chapel Hill in the US, a world apart and expectedly quite different from what I knew and was used to. *What will happen now?* I kept asking myself. *What will happen to us? What will happen to them?* Suddenly, it felt like I was in my childhood nightmare, going away from home, crossing the bridge to "the good side." All the fears, anxieties, and debilitating guilt were suddenly back. But this time, I knew what they meant and why.

In the midst of an overwhelming review of all of the changes that had occurred in the span of a few years, a bigger question was also on mind, almost in a state of disbelief: "How?" *How did all of this happen*? I asked myself. I could never have envisioned this scenario eight years ago. Not only had education opened my eyes to new possibilities, but it had also provided the possibility of social mobility. I had worked extremely hard to get to this point. But I also knew that opportunities would not have happened without the people who took a chance on me and had facilitated or made it possible along the way: From my fifth-grade teacher in Abadan to the Peace Corps volunteer in Jahrom to my professors in the university, especially Dr. Mehryar, who had been my long-time mentor and motivator. There was a clear thread linking all of them: The kindness of people who changed the trajectory of my life because they cared and invested in me.

Waiting at the airport in the early hours of the morning, I was overwhelmed by many intense and conflicting feelings: I was anxious, guilty, proud, excited, and hopeful, all at the same time! I was worried about the prospect of a new life in the U.S. We didn't know much about life there, didn't know anybody, didn't have a place to stay, and we didn't have enough money to survive if anything unexpected happened. An unfamiliar, scary, and exciting new world awaited us on the other side of the ocean, fifteen flight hours away.

9

Adaptation

You cannot keep the view by taking the window with you
James Richardson

I stood in front of the first section of the continental breakfast table, trying to figure out what was "continental" in the breakfast! This was an orientation event organized by the university, honoring international graduate students. There were fruits, toast, and doughnuts, among other items. I picked up one of the small boxes that were stacked next to a pitcher of milk, curious to find a description or a clue indicating what to do with it. A fellow student standing next to me in line noticed my confusion and said, "It is cereal." "You pour milk on it and eat it for breakfast," he said while handing me a bowl from the stack at the corner of the other table. The student was Jorge', a Mexican graduate student whom I had met the day Manijeh and I moved to the Odum Village, UNC's apartment-style married-student housing.

Manijeh and I had arrived from LaGuardia a week or so before. Tired and half asleep, we had taken a cab from Raleigh-Durham airport to the Carolina Inn on campus. The next day, we went to the housing office and were temporarily given a room in a dorm that housed graduate students. We moved out of there after a few days, when an apartment became available in Odum Village. On the day of our move, we saw Jorge and his wife, Lourdes, in the hallway. They introduced themselves and told us that they lived in one of the two downstairs apartments in the building. Jorge and Lourdes gradually became our close friends, to the point that they named their daughter Lourdes Manijeh when she was born two years or so later.

On the day of the breakfast reception at the UNC, Jorge and I walked together from our apartments to the venue on the other side of the vast campus. Learning from Jorge about breakfast cereal that day was among many cultural lessons I had received from him and others since arriving in Chapel Hill.

A day before that event, I had found Davie Hall, where the Psychology Department was housed. It was a huge three-story building, with the second and third floors canopied out, suspended in the air on all sides. The social psychology program occupied half of the third floor, while the Thurston Psychometrics Lab occupied the other half, with a huge IBM computer in the middle. That computer, almost as tall as me and a few yards wide on each side, probably could do as much as a laptop these days.

When I arrived on the section of the third floor that housed the social psychology program, I asked someone in an office with its door open, "Where is Dr. Thompson's office?" The lady behind the desk, a doctoral student herself, jumped up and asked me to follow her to the end of the corridor, knocked on the frame of an open door to let Dr. Thompson know that she had a

visitor, and left after I thanked her.

Dr. Thomson was an older faculty member, a full professor in charge of the social psychology doctoral program, whom everybody called by her first name, Vaida. She got up from behind her desk and came towards me, offering her handshake. In the next ten or fifteen minutes, she asked about my trip, Manijeh, and if we were able to move into our married student housing. I told her that we had. Vaida asked me to go with her to see my assigned office. I followed her through the narrow hallway until she knocked on the open door of one of the offices and stepped in. "This is your office from now on. Here is your desk," she said, pointing to a desk by the door. "I want you to meet your office mate, Charles."

Seeing us at the door, a bearded young man sitting at a wooden desk under the huge glass window got up and shook my hand. Vaida briefly introduced us. "Nice to meet you, Abbas! Welcome to the Tar Heels!" Charles said. Vaida left, giving us a chance to talk. I found out that Charles was a year ahead of me in the doctoral program and was originally from north Louisiana. Vaida had explained that in order to facilitate new students' adjustment, each was assigned to a shared office with a more senior one. I was happy to hear that, since I was facing a steep learning curve almost every hour of the day, from food to transportation, the southern accents, and the expected behaviors that I did not have a clue about. From that day on, Charles became my cultural mentor during graduate school years and even later (in Chapter 14, I will tell you about his re-emergence and such a later impact on my life, a decade later).

Graduate school was hectic and stressful, but it also provided me with opportunities to meet people, learn about the new culture, and share time. In the weeks that followed our move to the married student housing, Manijeh and I found a few other couples who became our close friends over time, including Jorge and Lourdes. Within a few weeks of arriving in town, we took our driver's license exams. The next step was to buy a car. International students whom we met told us about an Egyptian graduate student who bought old cars and repaired and reconditioned them before selling them to other international students. After we called him, he found us a decade-old Ford Falcon that worked well. Now we could visit Akbar and Zahra, who were living in the Duke married-student housing complex in Durham, about 30 minutes away. In the months to come, that car also gave the four of us a chance to travel around North Carolina to get to know this new world.

One Wednesday, a few months after we bought the car, Jorge saw an ad for a camping tent in an upcoming yard sale. We had been talking about camping, a concept that was new to me. "We already have our camping gear. Why don't we go and see if we can buy the tent for you so we can go camping together?" Jorge asked. Early on Saturday, he and I managed to buy that heavy, worn-out canvas tent for 15 dollars. That week, we bought sleeping bags and a few other items that we were told we needed for camping. Everything was ready for us to go camping with Jorge, Lourdes, and our French-Canadian couple friends who lived in the apartment downstairs from us.

The next weekend, we all drove to the Outer Banks of North Carolina, near Kitty Hawk. It was a sunny Friday in September, and the weather was still warm. Upon arriving at the campsite, my friends taught me how to set up the tent, putting plastic underneath to prevent moisture from coming through the floor, and staking the tent to prevent it from being lifted by strong winds. The three couples set up tents next to one another. We spent that Saturday exploring the area, seeing the lighthouse, and relaxing at the campsite. That night it rained hard. Manijeh and I woke up in the middle of the night in a pool of water. It happened that I had put the plastic under the tent but had not folded the edges underneath far enough! Rainwater from the sides of the old tent

had seeped over the plastic, creating a puddle right under us, eventually leaking inside. That first camping trip was great, even though we took a lot of wet stuff back home on Sunday!

That old tent served its purpose for a long time after that learning experience. We learned how to camp and were soon joined by Akbar and Zahra, who became avid campers themselves. Jorge and his wife left after he finished his master's degree. But every few weekends, we camped with Akbar and Zahra somewhere not more than a few hours' drive, mostly in the mountains of North Carolina and Tennessee.

The following summer, in June of 1976, I sold the old Ford and bought a 1972 Chevy Nova that we could travel longer distances with without worrying about mechanical problems. Manijeh and I packed that car and hit the road in late June, heading west. We took almost everything we could use while camping: a tent and sleeping bags, a stove, rice and beans, etc. We drove from Chapel Hill all the way to Seattle, up to British Columbia, then east along Canada Highway One to Ontario, heading south around Lake Erie, New York. On our way, we stayed a few days in Vancouver with Manijeh's sister and her family. For the rest of the trip, we camped in cheap campgrounds, mostly one night in each. It took us almost a month to complete the over six thousand-mile trip.

When you travel across the country through so many states and cities, you are bound to learn a lot about the country's culture, food, music, and much more. That trip was perhaps the best way to become familiar with so much in a relatively short time. We met all kinds of people and saw many state and national monuments on both sides of the US/Canada border, mostly on the U.S. side. Campsites were also great places to interact with and get to know so many people and their kindness.

That trip widened my perspective, showing me how diverse the US (and Canada) was in every way. It also showed me how kind people could be, regardless of cultural differences. However, it also got me in trouble with Vaida. When we left, she was out of town. I left a note in her mailbox on a Friday afternoon to let her know that I was leaving town for a few weeks. I didn't want her to get worried about my absence from the office. It was the week after the end of the spring semester; she was out of the office, and the campus was like a ghost town.

Upon returning to the office in mid-July, I went in to say hi to her and found her very angry. She made it clear that she was very unhappy with me for taking three weeks off. "You were expected to stay in town and work on your research in the summer," she told me. "I will notify your sponsor the next time you do something like this." Of course, that next time never happened. Another lesson learned, the hard way. Vaida did not stay upset with me for long. Charles would tease me many times, even thirty years later, that I was "the teacher's pet!"

In 1977, the third year of living in the US, we decided to take a weekend off and camp in the mountains. Driving through a rural road, I saw a pop-up tent camper for sale in front of a house. I stopped, looked, and talked to the owner, an old guy who was at home. The camper was old, consisting of two pull-out beds and faded canvas all around when popped up. It was reasonably priced. I gave him a deposit and returned the next weekend with cash. The Chevy had a trailer hitch, making it easy to take the camper with us. There was an area far in the back of our apartment complex where we could park extra vehicles or campers.

The four of us took that old camper to many places in the South in the next year. We even camped in South Florida, including the Florida Keys, during a winter break. Camping continued to function as a great cultural adaptation, also giving us a lot of joy together while we saw many places in the U.S. on a low budget whenever we could take a weekend off.

Work and life had their own challenges, but they were manageable. However, as we

approached our fourth year of living in the U.S., dark clouds gradually dominated our lives. In 1977, there was a sharp escalation of negative news coverage from Iran. There had been sporadic demonstrations back home against the Shah for months. Daily news coverage of demonstrations, crackdowns, arrests, and killings accelerated in 1978. I knew that members of my family, including my father, uncles, and teenage brothers, were very involved in the uprising. I was also very sympathetic to demonstrations against the Shah's oppressive regime, having heard stories of torture and suppression both when I was back home and since then. Decades later, Charles would joke every now and then that I was the rat who convinced him to attend a student demonstration against the monarchy, causing the Ayatollah to take over!

The only good news of 1978 was that my son Cyrus was born that summer. Soon, taking care of him provided a distraction from all the depressing daily news. Unrest and anti-government demonstrations continued in Iran until one day the Shah and his family fled the country for Egypt in January of 1979. I remember that day. Chet Insko, my dissertation advisor, came to my office to give me the news: "The bastard is gone," he said. "It seems like for good. I hope your family is OK."

In February of 1979 Khomeini, the vocal anti-Shah cleric who had been exiled and was living in France at that time, returned to the country and effectively led the takeover of the government by revolutionary forces. Chet asked me to explain what was going on in Iran. "They have two prime ministers now. What the heck is going on?" I explained that Khomeini had appointed Bazargan, a liberal nationalist figure, as the interim prime minister to run the country. "Bakhtiar, the other prime minister, was appointed by the Shah well before that," I explained. "I don't think he is going to survive." On February 11, 1979, Bakhtiar fled the country.

In the months before and after the monarchy fell, there was talk of freedom and democracy among the non-secular political opposition to the Shah, both in Iran and abroad. Chet and I discussed the revolution often, in the office and sometimes over lunch. I told him about my hopes and optimism about the future of the country. "It is the Spring of Freedom in Iran," I told him. Chet was quick to tell me that "the newly suggested constitution is clearly non-democratic." Regardless, I was homesick and eager to return to participate in building the ideal democratic society that was supposed to emerge with the fall of the long-lasting dictatorship. Chet and Vaida and my graduate school friends, including Charles and Richard, were not thrilled to hear that I was thinking of going back.

In November of 1979, a group of anti-American university students took over the US Embassy in Tehran, taking everybody hostage. The hostage crisis made life quite unpleasant for those of us who lived in the US at that time. On the day of the hostage crisis, I was home when Chet called. "You and your family need to come stay with us for a few days," he said. "Verla and I have cleaned up the basement, and it is ready for you!" I asked what was happening, and he explained, "The bastards have attacked the American Embassy in Tehran and have taken everyone hostage. The news media are reporting violence against Iranian students. We are worried that some knucklehead might retaliate against Iranian students here in Chapel Hill."

Now, I was both in shock and in a kind of denial. How could this have happened? "This is a temporary problem. I am sure they will deal with it soon," I told him. "There are good people in positions of power there." To me, it was obviously a mishap by a bunch of hot-tempered extremist college kids. *It will be resolved by tomorrow,* I thought. I did not know how wrong I was. Tomorrow came, and Khomeini openly declared his support for the hostage takers.

That evening, utterly shocked by the news and struck by his kindness, I thanked Chet and

assured him that Odum Village was calm and safe. I promised to call him and take the offer on the first indication of any hostile behavior or crisis. Later that evening, Vaida also called. She wanted to know that we were OK. She already knew about Chet's offer, or perhaps she was the one who had initially suggested the idea. As I had told Chet, I told Vaida too that this was "a temporary problem that would hopefully be solved quickly by the Iranian moderate politician in charge."

I found out the next day that, on the same evening, on Franklin Street (the Chapel Hill downtown on the outskirts of the campus), a group of drunk students had attacked one of my fellow graduate students. He was a dark-skinned American of Italian descent with a mustache, apparently attacked because 'he looked Iranian.' In the next days, there were demonstrations against Iranians in various cities, calling for their deportation. There were also news reports of mobs attacking Iranian students.

Student demonstrations, 1979[6]

The hostage crisis continued for months.[7] Each evening, the news on the TV started with a count of how many days the hostages were in captivity. Ted Coppell's Nightline news had a huge counter on the upper corner of the TV showing the number of days since the crisis started. Like many in the US, I was angry at the hostage-takers and depressed because everyone seemed powerless to resolve the crisis. Regardless of what I believed, the sense of peace and security that I had enjoyed in the U.S. for a few years was shattered. Across the nation, there were many who associated Iranian immigrants with some of the hardships they felt at home, especially the sharp increases in the price of oil and gas. Most of the time, I refused to tell people where I was from. On multiple occasions, when asked, I told people that I was from Cyprus. Being relatively unknown to people in the US, Cyprus was a safe bet. Nobody questioned it.

In November 1979, the United States froze all the assets of the Iranian banks and government. President Carter ordered a review of all Iranian students' status to deport those who were not abiding by the terms of their entry visas (see Washington Post, November 11, 1979, for more

details). Like other Iranian students, I was notified to come in for an official interview with immigration officers. Upon my arrival, I was interrogated by two officers after a mug shot of me was taken in front of a whiteboard:

"Who are you?"

"How long have you been here?"

"What do you usually do in your spare time?"

"Do you know any Iranians here?"

"Your relationship with them?"

"Who is back home?"

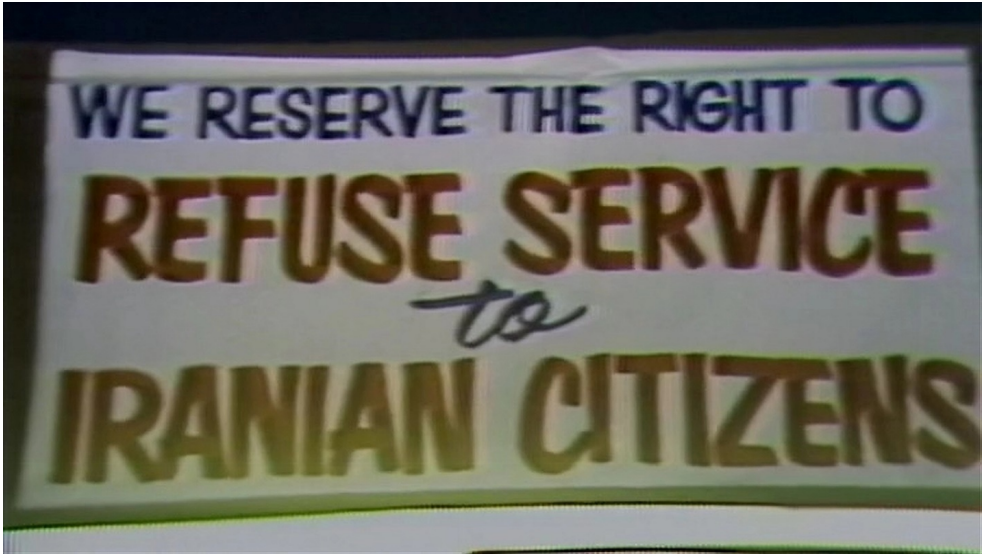
"When were you in Iran the last time?"

Questioning went on for some time while I thought to myself, *You already know all of this. Why ask?*

Despite the unpleasantness of the interview, it was formal and respectful. At the end, the tone changed a bit. My assumption was that they knew what they needed to know. I was seen as a safe bet. I was scheduled to teach two courses in the spring, had defended my dissertation, and had a wife who was herself a doctoral student at Duke. Normal stuff. Maybe all of that gave them the assurance they needed that I was not a threat.

The offer came as a last question before sending me out: "Do you want to stay here? We can give you a green card if you do." The tone of the officer who made the offer was kind and sympathetic. That was the last thing I expected, taking me by surprise. My guess is that I looked like a deer in the headlights! After a few moments of silence, searching my brain for an answer, in my utter stupidity and lack of experience, I thanked him and responded, "I am really homesick. I need to go home and take care of my elderly parents." He nodded and said, "I understand!" And that was that.

My statement to the office was an honest one. During the last months of living in Chapel Hill, I was terribly depressed and very homesick, tired of being pushed around, tired of having to keep a low profile, and always being on the lookout. The uprising in Iran that led to the Islamic Revolution caused severe gas shortages in the US. Long lines at gas stations were a fact of life. Everyone was angry at Iranian students, who were seen as the cause, even though we didn't have anything to do with it. It was true that a large majority of students from Iran had been sympathetic to the movement or participated in the demonstrations against the Shah. Suddenly, we were all considered the enemy. The hostage crisis had made living in the U.S. quite difficult for us.



Please see Note[8]

While all of this was going on, I had to deal with another crisis. Early in 1979, my scholarship payments stopped, since they were funded by the previous regime in Iran. That summer, I found a job in the university library, cataloging a large number of Arabic and Persian books that were in boxes. On Wednesdays, Manijeh and I delivered the weekly local penny-saver publication, the *Village Advocate*, to houses for minimal pay based on the number of copies delivered. At the university, the faculty knew about my financial crisis. The department quickly arranged for me to work as a teaching assistant in two summer courses. Vaida and Chet initiated that without even asking me. A few weeks before that, John Thibaut, a highly respected figure in social psychology, asked me to his office and offered to lend me money. I told him about my job in the library and that I had some savings, and there was an upcoming teaching assistantship. "I am grateful for your kindness, and I promise to let you know if I need help," I said.

These acts of kindness continued. The next fall I was assigned to teach two courses. The situation back home seemed to be stabilizing. However, I was worried about my father, who had just survived a heart attack. I was worried about my family's finances, with four brothers and two sisters still at home. I felt guilty that I was not a part of rebuilding the country after the Shah had been toppled. Back home, the university was putting pressure on my family, asking for me to return as a part of the agreement for my scholarship. Exhausted under all the pressures, early in the fall semester of 1979, I told Vaida that I had to return home at the end of the semester. She needed to assign someone else to teach two courses that were scheduled for me in the spring.

Akbar and Zahra had already returned to Shiraz at the end of summer. Before their return, in March of 1979, Akbar and I drove a big station wagon to Baltimore, tightly packed with the household items that they wanted shipped to Iran. We got stuck on the road due to the gas shortage. There were long lines everywhere at gas stations. It took us two days to reach Baltimore and the shipping agent that one of our friends had recommended. Before Akbar and Zahra left North Carolina for Iran, they received confirmation that their items were shipped to the port of Khorramshahr in Iran. Their shipment got there after a few months without a problem.

When it came to shipping my own stuff back home, things turned out differently. I repeated

the journey to Baltimore by myself in November. The huge station wagon was packed with small household items that I delivered to the same shipper as before. Requiring advance payment, he promised to pack everything in a container and ship it to Iran. That shipping container reached us almost two years later, through Turkey, after much follow-up with the shipping company and payment of additional expenses. The agent had not shipped the container to Khorramshahr right away. By the time he got things ready for shipment to Khorramshahr, the Iran-Iraq war had started, and Iraqi forces had destroyed the port city. Charging extra fees, the agent eventually rerouted our possessions via Turkey. They were delivered to us in Shiraz months after that.

In the last days of 1979, a few days after Christmas, Manijeh, Cyrus, and I had left the U.S. Shortly after the embargo, all flights from the US to Iran had been canceled. We flew to Paris, and after spending a day in the airport, on to Tehran, eager and anxious at the same time. There was a sad feeling of finality in that trip. Strangely, it reminded me, again, of my nightmare facing the storm while on the bridge to get to the other side.

I loved Chapel Hill and North Carolina, despite the recent hard times there. On the flight to Tehran, I was already missing the place, the university, and my friends. It was comforting to be going home and seeing everybody again, although we knew that we had to adapt to many changes in the political system, daily living, and the university environment. Both Manijeh and I had jobs waiting for us at the university in Shiraz. Chapel Hill was already a distant place on the other side of the ocean, visible afar through memories that were pleasant, despite the hardships of the previous year there. I didn't have a clue that the small town was going to be like a distant light in an upcoming storm for me, fully mapping my future life trajectory. I will tell you why later.

10

Homecoming

One thing that I know is certain about life is that it is full of ups and downs. But my life (and many others) during the first few years of the Revolution was more like an emotional (and sociopolitical) roller coaster. Those years were packed with many instances of building and dismantling, rising and falling, hoping and losing hope that were built on optimism about the future. Extreme ups and downs were present, both in my personal and professional life and in the larger sociopolitical context that they were intertwined with.

The closure of the universities practically dismantled a higher education system that had been meticulously built in the previous decades, although there were flaws in it as well. I had been a beneficiary of that higher education system. Unfortunately, during the three years of the closure, a large number of faculty were fired or forced into retirement. For others, a condition of remaining on the payroll was a humiliating ritual of reporting to work every morning at 8 a.m., signing the attendance book, which was kept at the guardhouse at the entrance of the fenced college, and signing out after about 4:30 p.m.

During these clocked hours, since there were no classes to teach, everyone on the payroll was expected to spend time on approved research, a clinical project, writing or translating a text, and/or following another approved service plan. Proposals for these activities had to be submitted beforehand and approved by a special committee at the Ministry of Higher Education in Tehran. My submitted plan included translating a book by Sharon Brehm called Applications of Social Psychology to Clinical Practice, since clinical books were valued and considered politically safe. It took me a long time, but I finally finished that translation and submitted it for potential publication, since the copyrights belonged to the institution. Despite months of follow-up, I received no communication about the fate of that book. Eventually, in the context of all the new upheaval that happened in my life, I stopped asking. That book was never published. I guess that mine was not the sole intellectual casualty of the times.

During the closure of the universities, being a clinician provided safe opportunities to contribute. A few months into the closure, my colleague Hossein suggested proposing to establish a free addiction treatment clinic that would be supervised by the two of us and staffed with student volunteers. He was an excellent clinician who had been my own professor years ago, when I was in the master's program, with the credentials to get the proposal approved. We established the clinic in a large off-campus facility and garden that was the site of the old music department, located in the middle of a residential area.

As we had negotiated with the health department, after the clinic was established, the health department staff brought methadone each day and gave it to our clients, who stood in line and

took their doses under surveillance, one by one. With the help of a large group of student volunteers, we also provided family and individual therapy, daily activities on-site, and some home visits.

This went smoothly for weeks until one Saturday morning (the beginning of the workweek), Hossein and I received urgent calls from the university, telling us that the clinic was to be immediately closed. Unbeknownst to us, during the weekend, allegedly with the encouragement and engagement of some "leftist" student volunteers, a group of clients had decided to demonstrate in front of the governor's office, which was not far from the clinic. The goal of the demonstration was, apparently, "to ask for more resources" for the clients. From what we were told later by some students, the demonstration had not gone well. It was quelled and quickly denounced as a ploy by pro-*Mujahedeen* students to incite unrest. The entire volunteer student group was now implicated in that accusation. After so much work to build it, the clinic was gone overnight. Hossein and I were lucky we were not arrested as the main officials of the clinic, since it became clear to the authorities that we did not know anything about the demonstrations, before or after.

Suspending the clinic added to our frustration and stress over the closure of the university and the hardships due to the ongoing war with Iraq. When a peculiar distraction came up as an opportunity to travel to the war zone for a few days, both Hossein and I were ready to take advantage of it. An announcement came through the pikes inviting the faculty to be "war zone observers." The apparent goal of the invitation was to bear witness to war atrocities by the Saddam army and to understand the heroism of revolutionary forces who fought against it.

I was bitter about the war and how the US and allies had made it possible and supported Saddam in starting and maintaining it. The war had been going on for almost three years at that point, with weapons provided to Saddam Hussein by the US, Russia, and European allies. Some of that assistance made it possible for Saddam Hussein to develop and use chemical weapons, both against the Iranians and Iraq's own Kurdish citizens, as described by Wikipedia:

"According to Iraqi documents, assistance in the development of chemical weapons was obtained from firms in many countries, including the United States, West Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and France. A report stated that Dutch, Australian, Italian, French, and both West and East German companies were involved in the export of raw materials to Iraqi chemical weapons factories."

Two years before, when the invasion by Iraqis was announced, I was ready to go to the frontline to fight. Hearing that announcement, I forgot all the ongoing frustrations, struggles, and fears. All the rage at the political machine was refocused on the external enemy who had rolled tanks into Khorramshahr and around Abadan, my birthplace. But my initial willingness to join the defense forces did not translate to actually packing up and joining the hastily organized caravans of volunteers in buses and in the back of pickup trucks heading southwest to the frontline. Hundreds of thousands of young people, many of them teenagers, were recruited to participate to be a part of the "good and right," the "Army of God," to fight against the army of "Zionists and Imperialists." Added to their nationalistic sentiments to fight the invaders, they were also promised sure places in heaven if they got killed. As time passed and war lingered, many of these young volunteers did not return home, including one of my younger cousins. Many others returned home wounded, some permanently disabled. The book, I, Who Did Not Die, by Zahed Haftlang and Najah Aboud, provides good accounts of the brutality of that war.

When the opportunity came along to apply and be an "observer" in the war zone, Hossein and

I both submitted requests, and both were invited to travel with a group of 20 or 25 faculty and staff "observers." We left Shiraz early morning on a sunny and warm day in May. Two bus drivers took turns for many hours, all day and through the night. By the next morning, we were in a village in the southwest. I don't remember the exact location, but it was a ghost village whose inhabitants had been poisoned by Saddam Hussein's chemical bombs at some point early in the war. The Iraqis dropped chemical bombs on many villages during the war, both on the Iranian side and on their own Kurdish side. Our group of visitors was taken to the only street in one of these villages, where we could walk around the neighborhoods. Houses were all intact, with signs of previous life and living scattered all around, but no living souls. I saw a little girl's doll in a corner of a room in one of the houses and started crying, thinking of my own daughter, who had been born not long before that day. I was not the only one fighting tears. What kind of monster does this kind of thing to others?

As abruptly as we had arrived, we somberly left, heading south that afternoon towards Abadan. That night, we slept on the floor of a mosque far from the war front. At dusk, a caravan of young men who were also resting there said goodbye before heading west to the front line, packed in the back of pickup trucks. I found out later in the reports that those pickup trucks came back that day, like many other days, empty or with a few bodies. Most bodies could not be retrieved from the minefields and electrified swamps.

We left in the morning, after a modest breakfast of feta cheese, flatbread, and hot, sweet tea, the traditional Iranian breakfast. It was almost dusk when we got close to Abadan (my birthplace). Some parts of the road were curtained by huge berms of dirt to hide the vehicles and protect the road from Iraqi mortars and rocket-propelled grenades. I remembered having traveled along that same road many times in the past, going from Dezful to Abadan when I was doing my own military service almost a decade earlier. Old memories were coming back in full force.

Not far from the city, there suddenly was a loud explosion, and the bus driver made a jerky movement that caused the bus to wobble momentarily. A rocket-propelled grenade had landed not far from the road, on the other side of the berm. That was a reminder for everyone that we were not far from the front lines. By the time we arrived in Abadan, it was almost dark. We were taken to a high school that I had temporarily attended for a few weeks when I was in the ninth grade. It was being used as a shelter. We spent the night there, sleeping on the rugs on the floor of a classroom. Either the night was uneventful, I was dead tired and slept through it, or I have blocked my memories of anything that happened that night.

At dawn, everyone was up for morning prayer. We were told that soldiers stationed on the tops of palm trees on the Iraqi side of the river were shooting at anyone in their sights, preventing us from seeing much of the city. We were loaded into the back of pickup trucks and taken to relatively safer parts, letting us walk behind dirt piles and sandbags. We saw more on the way back out of town that day, farther from the border. So many ruined houses. So many of the old palm trees that I grew up with were burned or were missing their tops, ripped and shredded by artillery fire. I did not get a chance to see the most familiar parts of Abadan: my old elementary school and the surrounding neighborhoods near downtown. We left town late afternoon to return to Shiraz.

The next morning, when we arrived in Shiraz, we had already heard the big news on the bus radio: Khorramshahr had been liberated during the night. When the bus entered the city of Shiraz, people were in the streets, celebrating. Cars were honking, and loudspeakers were broadcasting minute-by-minute reports of events on the front line in Khorramshahr. The liberation, which

had been considered impossible up to that night, had happened at a high cost. Later, we found out that it had taken a heavy toll on the volunteer fighting forces, with an estimated seventy thousand killed, wounded, captured, or lost during that operation. So many dead, and so much destroyed, while the war went on for years.

Almost a year later, as abruptly as the universities had been closed, one day they were reopened by the order of the Cultural Revolution Council. Soon, classes started, and many, but not all, students were back—those who were not expelled by the Cleansing Committees. Other students had been arrested, imprisoned, executed, or simply denied re-admission. Regardless, the opening of the universities raised new hopes that there would be some resemblance of normality. Manijeh and I returned to Shiraz after four and a half years of living in the U.S. We were graduate students in Shiraz when we left for Chapel Hill in 1975, while also working full-time. Now we were back as new faculty members at the same institution, renamed Shiraz University. We had changed much during the four and a half years, and so had the university—and the world, for that matter.

We had left at a time of relative prosperity for Iran. However, there was also a wide wealth gap in the country. As a result, our families were not among those who benefited from the prosperity that was bringing material modernity with it, especially in urban areas —where people were gaining access to refrigerators, washing machines, TVs, and cars. When I was a student, most students who enrolled at Pahlavi University were from well-to-do families. I was in a group that was an exception. Tuition was free, but if it weren't for the work-study program and odd jobs, I could not afford to eat.

Now Manijeh and I were back, and suddenly my brain was bursting with memories of my previous life in Shiraz. The beautiful sour orange trees along the streets were still there. So were the thousands of rose bushes in the middle of the boulevard going from the airport to the city, impatiently waiting for the spring. I owed much to this city and the university it housed. It was great to be back and to start paying the debt forward.

Symbolizing a new beginning for us, we had celebrated the 1980 New Year's Eve on the Air France flight from Paris to Tehran. The Iran Air flight from Tehran to Shiraz was short. Arriving tired and jet-lagged in mid-morning, we saw a group of people waving at us in the terminal. My brothers and sisters were there; Manijeh's brother Ali and her sister, Leila, were there too, all excited to hug the three of us. After fifteen minutes of hugs, laughs, and kisses, we left the airport by car. On the way, exhausted, with a storm of memories going through my mind, I gazed at the streets, traffic, buildings, and people.

I could immediately see how different Shiraz had become after the Revolution. The traffic was even crazier than when we left. It seemed like nobody was in charge. Everybody drove as if the road belonged only to them! Almost every wall on the streets was covered with pictures of Ayatollah Khomeini, angry people demonstrating with their fists up, and quotes from Khomeini's speeches and writings. Women's attire had drastically changed, with women covering their hair, and some wearing the traditional *chador*. Not long after arriving, I realized that there were constant disagreements between different people in the family about the state of the country, the Revolution, and the future. People were passionate about their beliefs to the point that sometimes within a family there were two or more factions arguing with each other daily.

Two days after our arrival, we went to Jahrom to see my parents and siblings. Mother was elated to see us, and we were equally excited to see her and the rest of the family. Beaming with pride and excitement, Mother was busy running the house, cooking, and cleaning. Not much had

changed on that front. She did what she always did. Father had just started his job in the *Jahad-e-Sazandegi* (Revival Corps) as a rural conflict-resolution mediator. There is a long tradition in Iran for older men (often referred to as *Reesh-sefeed* meaning white-bearded) to take an active role in managing conflicts in extended families and in the larger communities, especially in the rural areas. The revolution had been good for him, giving him purpose and a respectable job through which he was effectively contributing.

Rahman, my oldest of the three brothers who still lived at home, was in his last year of high school. He had long been engaged in underground political activities and participating in demonstrations against the regime. But now he was in conflict with some of the other people who had also been engaged in covert activities with him. Some of the people he knew well had taken the lead on attacking, and in a few cases killing, those who were seen as 'liberals' or with leftist tendencies. The zealous followers of the local religious leader were actively hunting the *Mujahedeen-e-Khalq* (People's Army), members of the leftist religious guerrilla group who had been active in opposing the Shah's regime for a long time. Anyone suspected was beaten or killed in Jahrom by vigilantes, who were now starting to loosely organize into local militias (*Baseej*).

From the first days of returning to Iran, much of my time was spent listening to stories of the events that led to the revolution and the current state of affairs. While visiting Jahrom to see my family, there were visits by friends and extended family, most of whom were devoted supporters of Ayatollah Khomeini. I saw uncles and aunts and many cousins, both those whom I was close to a long time ago when I was younger, and the younger ones whom I didn't know well. We couldn't stay in Jahrom for more than a few days. Manijeh's uncle had found a rental home for us near where he lived. We had to go back to sign the contract and move in. Our work at the university was also starting soon.

Since Khomeini's return, he had appointed Bazargan as the prime minister to run the government. The new constitution had been written and ratified a few weeks before we arrived (December 3, 1979). Hardliners were attacking the government of Bazargan, calling it pro-American. "Revolutionary Courts" were working nonstop, sentencing many of the officials and supporters of the previous regime to death or to imprisonment. The news of the executions was in the national and international media daily. Disturbingly, the killings accelerated in Tehran over time and expanded to provinces. Political discussions were hot in the family, sometimes leading to bitter disagreements over the way things were done.

I started my first day as a new faculty member at the university with excitement and optimism almost two weeks after returning to Shiraz. On a Wednesday morning, I finished my paperwork in the university personnel office and took a taxi to the College of Arts and Sciences, where my office would be located. The department had already assigned me an office. Before leaving the U.S., I had mailed boxes of books, journals, and such, addressed to my department at the university—lots of materials that I had thought would help in my teaching, research, and writing. The boxes were all there and had been placed in my new office by Mr. Izadi, a gentleman who serviced the department by running errands, xeroxing hand-outs, making tea, and cleaning the floors. I spent some time in the department that day, going around to meet the faculty and unpacking a few boxes. The next morning, I returned to place books on the shelf and put documents in folders in the file cabinet in preparation for the start of the semester next week. I left shortly after noon, when the office was already closed for the weekend (in Iran, the weekend started on Thursday at noon. The workweek started on Saturday).

When I arrived early on Saturday morning, the first of many surprises in my job awaited me!

Upon my arrival, I was told by Mr. Izadi and the guard at the entrance of the college that my office had been broken into during the previous evening. Windows were broken, boxes were torn open, files from the file cabinet were all over the office floor, and loose pages of paper were scattered in the courtyard outside the office. Apparently, a group of students was looking in my new office for something, some kind of document. One explanation, based on rumors within student groups, was that they were looking for documents in the office because they thought it still belonged to a previous faculty member who had been forced to leave the university a few weeks before. In the back of my mind, however, I doubted that explanation. My suspicion was confirmed in the following weeks, when I heard that some students were openly referring to me as an American spy.

The first weeks of the semester were full of tensions between two groups of students from the left and right of the political spectrum, before and after classes. On one side were the well-armed and highly organized *Mujahedeen* (members of the Organization of People's Mujahedeen) who were devoted Muslims but with leftist tendencies. On the other side were the *Hezbollahi* (followers of the Party of God), a group of religious conservative students who were strict followers of Khomeini. They were also armed with weapons taken when the army barracks had been breached.

Clashes were occurring between these two groups locally, as well as all over the country, especially in Tehran. It didn't take long before the *Mujahedeen* were outlawed as a "terrorist organization." After a bloody demonstration that year, which led to the arrest and execution of many, they retaliated and bombed government buildings in Tehran. One bombed building was the headquarters of the new Islamic Republic Party. Seventy-four were killed, including twenty high-ranking officials of the government.

There was a third group of students who were not engaged in violent clashes. That group was a part of a large population of liberal individuals across the country who were not happy with the takeover of the revolution and the country by religious conservatives. That included many of the technocrats who were running the universities, factories, and most of the social and economic institutions in the country. Many educators, healthcare workers, journalists, lawyers, and other professionals were among them. At the national level, this group included the more liberal and democratically oriented intellectuals, including Bazargan (the newly appointed interim prime minister by Khomeini) and Banisadr, who was elected as president within weeks of my arrival. Those supporting a strict Islamic government were engaged in a fierce political and public opinion campaign against this group. Not being armed, the liberals were unable to put up any meaningful resistance to defend a secular democratic system of government. Strongly opposing these democratically oriented revolutionaries, Khomeini supported a new constitution that permanently put a non-elected religious figure on top of the political system as the Supreme Leader.

During the first weeks of my teaching job at Shiraz University, there were frequent skirmishes between militant students in and outside of the College of Arts and Sciences—a separate campus in the middle of a residential neighborhood—leading to injuries. Across the country, the universities were the main battlegrounds of conflicting ideologies, with constant demonstrations by the supporters of the new president, the *Mujahedeen*, and the *Hezbollahi*. By now, the *Hezbollahi* had the support of a loose collection of neighborhood militias known as *Baseej* and the more formal security force named *Sepah* (The Revolutionary Guards), both enjoying the support of Khomeini and the religious establishment.

On March 21, 1980, addressing the nation for the Persian New Year, Khomeini talked about the

necessity of purging the universities of professors who were "affiliated with East and West." A month later, in his Friday prayer sermon, he declared a holy war against the students who, in his assessment, had turned the universities into battlegrounds against the Revolution. After the prayer that day, and in the following days, armed gangs attacked major universities in the country. In Shiraz and other universities, clashes led to hundreds of injuries and many deaths.

Soon after, the Supreme Leader labeled the universities "brainwashing places" that "upheld Western and non-Islamic ideas and ideals." After bloody clampdowns in universities across the country, they were all closed by early June, with the Supreme Leader's announcement that they would not reopen until they were "cleansed" of liberal and anti-revolutionary elements. Soon, with the establishment of a Cultural Revolution Council in Tehran, a Chinese-style cultural revolution started with the goal of "cleansing the universities of Western influences and non-Islamic ideas and curriculum." "Cleansing" (*Paksazi)* committees later expanded to every social institution across the country, in and outside of the universities. Across the country, many of the opposing students and faculty were arrested or "purged," and the university was put completely under the control of the Islamic Councils.

While all of the turmoil was going on, I was home on Friday, upset about all that was happening locally and nationally, listening to the radio's live broadcast of the speech of the head ayatollah in Shiraz, addressing a large crowd after the Friday prayer. He was specifically attacking the university professors, accusing them of not being with the revolution and "with the people." People cheered and chanted when he excitedly addressed the professors. "Oh, university professors: They [the people] will annihilate you if you don't change." Clearly alarmed, I was thinking of all the consequences of this open war on intellectuals, specifically people like me. On my 6th month of returning, the big existential question returned to my mind in full force: *What the heck am I going to do now*?

When the doorbell rang that afternoon, I was happy to find my uncle AbbasAli at the door. Apparently, he was in Shiraz for a day or two and had decided to come visit. Grateful to him for doing that, I made tea and sat down to share it with him. The short-wave radio was on in the kitchen, replaying the head ayatollah's speech that day. Visibly angry, shaken, and alarmed, I made a derogatory comment about "the idiot who is presumably leading the people in Shiraz!" Soon, we got into a political argument about all the events happening at the universities and beyond. He eventually looked at me angrily, telling me before he stormed out, "We need to kill a hundred thousand people like you! This country will be fixed then!" A revolutionary to his core, I am sure he meant it at that moment, although I doubt he would do it, even if he had the power to. But the statement represented a belief system that was prevalent among some of the revolutionaries at that time who took the lead in executing numerous intellectuals found guilty of being the "Enemies of God," a designation punishable by death.

Sadly, that was the last time that I saw Uncle AbbasAli. We never had a chance to talk about that day and that comment, or anything else that was happening all over the country. He was appointed as the head of one of the post-revolutionary organizations (Imam Foundation) in Abadan and took higher leadership positions later, both in the Khuzestan province and in the capital, Tehran.

I had taught at Shiraz University for less than six months when the "Cultural Revolution" started with the closure of the universities. During those months, the work environment had been tense, but classes had proceeded almost without disruption. Upon the closing of the universities, Islamic student organizations were established in every college within the university. Those

organizations started to actively purge anyone seen as critical of the new Islamic Republic or perceived to be a potential threat to it. Soon, a faculty group joined them and officially took over the leadership of the college as an "Islamic Committee," a scenario playing out in other colleges and universities across the country.

Starting from my first days back at Shiraz, there was constant tension between me and some of the students. A group of leftist students opposed me, accusing me of being pro-American, or even worse, openly calling me an American spy. Another group of students reluctantly defended me as a new faculty member who had just returned to the country to serve, a sign of commitment to the new revolution. A few of them seemed to know my family background (many members of my extended family, including uncles and cousins, were active figures in the revolution and were in positions of power in the new establishment). Whatever the justification, there was some reluctant support for me among this group of students.

Sometime before the Cultural Revolution, in the first months of my return to Shiraz, my brother-in-law Ali had asked me to write an article for a national newspaper called Islamic Revolution. He had moved from Germany to Shiraz with his family a year before that. He was a physician with strong revolutionary sentiments and support for the newly elected President Banisadr. The Islamic Revolution was a supporter of Banisadr's secular government. Knowing that I was a social psychologist with expertise in attitude formation and change, he liked to talk with me about propaganda, censorship, and psychological warfare. Eventually, with his encouragement, I wrote a long article about the dangers of censorship in a post-revolutionary society. It argued that censorship was emerging at all levels, threatening to derail the democratic ideals of the time. That article also warned that, among other impacts, censorship would leave people defenseless against psychological warfare and propaganda from external enemies and would destroy people's trust in the system. I used the analogy of the boy who cried wolf to describe some of the people in power at the time, warning that their credibility would be questioned if censorship continued.

Amid all the political crises that eventually led to the closing of the universities, I was surprised when one day the national newspaper came out with my article filling the entire back page. Within months, when the president was impeached and forced to flee the country to Paris, the Islamic Revolution newspaper was suspended. Many supporters of Banisadr were arrested, and the back issues of the newspaper were pulled out of libraries and burned by vigilantes. I kept a copy of my article hidden for some time, despite my fear of putting it and myself on the radar screen of the Cleansing Committees.

Another big event also occurred right after the closure of the universities, leading to years of hardship. In September of 1980, Iraq started the eight-year war by attacking the southern border cities. In the next months, the sirens went on almost every night for a while, indicating that Iraqi jets were in the sky. The Iranian air force was in disarray and could not defend the skies. During the raids, the electricity grid was turned off to hide the city in darkness. We covered the windows of a room with aluminum foil and blankets so that we could turn our candles and flashlights on those nights. Sometimes the blackout would last for hours. Living in a one-story house, there was nowhere to go. We did not have a basement or any type of shelter. The family sat in half-darkness in a room, anxious and afraid, waiting for the next siren to announce the end of the threat. Every now and then, a target was hit, and a loud noise could be heard from far away, adding to the continuous sound of anti-aircraft guns.

Soon, the war and American economic embargo started taking a toll on everybody in another

way: Food and other necessities were in short supply. Families were given coupons that could be exchanged for food items, gasoline, and propane gas for heating and cooking. There were long lines to exchange these coupons for goods, sometimes taking hours for a dozen eggs or a bag of rice. There was an informal communication system through which friends and family would let you know who in town had which item to go stand in line for. Amid all of these depressing events in Shiraz, my daughter Mitra was born, giving us a moment of celebration.

While the universities were closed, many faculty members were kept on the payroll. Most of us at the university assumed that the closure was a short-term event and that the moderates would prevail at the national level and reopen them. To the contrary, many faculty were investigated by the Cleansing Committees and were either allowed to stay with conditions or were fired. Dr. Bathaee, my old professor and new colleague, a respected tenured full professor, was among the latter group. Upon being fired by the university, he established an automobile tire repair shop and worked there with his son until they were able to flee the country. Other colleagues or former professors of mine were forced into retirement.

There wasn't anything to accuse me of, since I was a new faculty member from a poor and clearly conservative family background, with an extended family that was actively involved in the pre-revolution resistance and post-revolution institutions. I did not have a "questionable" history and was not openly hostile to the system, so I was not fired. However, as I will tell you next, that reluctant detente with the system eventually fell apart, escalating the uncertainty and fear that gradually took over both my work environment and daily living.

11

Emotional Roller-Coaster

Life inside and outside of the institution, however, remained quite stressful. On the inside, the Islamic Committees were controlling who was hired, who remained employed, who was admitted, and which students continued. Female faculty, staff, and students were constantly harassed over how they acted, what they wore, and any makeup they dared to put on. Azar Nafisi's book Reading Lolita in Tehran provides a good account of these restrictions. The 2022 uprising of women in Iran that was brutally suppressed by the regime was the latest reaction to those restrictions.

Outside of the university, life was also chaotic. There was stark economic hardship for many, due to war and the US embargo. Getting daily necessities was a major challenge. There were ration coupons, but lines were long, and one had to find out which stores/centers had what was needed. Gas lines were long, and the rationed volume was barely enough to cover daily commutes. As a result of all of this, a thriving black market existed that provided almost anything at high prices. Instead of focusing on that, the clampdown continued on anything or anyone that was perceived as a threat to the regime or the conservative ideologies. Morality squads were everywhere. Women were constantly harassed over what they wore and how they looked, and vigilantes had free rein to handle any dissent. A dictatorship was now firmly in place, largely fueled from the bottom rather than imposed from the top, as was the case before the Revolution. But, somehow similar to the previous regime, this one was also drenched in corruption, dominating the imports of goods to the country, black markets, and even contraband merchandise such as alcoholic beverages.

With the reopening of the universities, another interesting cultural process started changing the structure of the student body: A positive effect of the Islamic Revolution. Many of the students were now from poor and disadvantaged families, and a majority were women, who could be seen everywhere, some wearing black *chador*s. Many were active members of the Islamic Student Committees and Islamic Jihad student organizations. In addition to facilitating access to higher education, the Islamic Revolution had given the masses the confidence to send their daughters to universities that were once seen as corrupting agencies. That cultural change, in turn, had changed the university admissions, democratizing it so that it no longer favored the economic or political elite. Four decades later, as I write this, the majority of graduates of the institutions of higher education in Iran are women. This is also seen in the literacy rate for the adult population in the country, which is higher than before the revolution, especially for women.

When the universities reopened, I became very busy, teaching four courses each semester and actively engaged in research among adolescents, with the help of a group of my motivated students who were instrumental in securing permission from the district to administer questionnaires to students in high school classes. They helped me collect data in schools, also

using parts of that data for their own required research projects in an advanced research methods course.

Within a year of its opening, the university was administratively and politically stable, with a group of conservative students, faculty, and staff firmly in charge. The Muslim Student Association and the Islamic Committees controlled everything. The hurried purging of "undesirable" faculty and students had come to a slow conclusion. Now, purging occurred in admissions and in the hiring of faculty and staff. I had a few colleagues in the department, all Western-educated, who had a strong drive to rebuild the programs. We developed and proposed a new graduate program in clinical psychology, which was approved within months, allowing us to admit students. However, we were infuriated because we could not admit some bright students to the newly approved graduate program because of vetoes by the college's Islamic Committee.

Fortunately, most didn't give up easily and were eventually admitted a year later, as restrictions eased a bit. The majority of these students were women and eager to learn. Some were struggling to cope with the restrictions imposed by fanatical hardliners within the student body, but that did not deter them from their stellar performance.

I am happy to report that in the decade that followed, most of these students assumed professional and leadership positions or taught at institutions of higher education, both in Iran and abroad. They went on to become practicing psychologists, leaders of the Iranian Psychological Association, deans of a few colleges, and faculty members at various universities.

Although at some level, the pre-closure chaos of the university environment improved, the challenges and frustrations of teaching remained. It was almost impossible to teach social psychology, especially the theories and principles of attitude change, without discussing censorship, propaganda, and brainwashing. Dilemmas were present in every course, from child development to social psychology, in most class sessions, and in discussions of every topic. I was educated in the US and thought like a Western-educated intellectual. I struggled to keep that from entering my teaching, writing, and translating the materials that were used in classes. Clashes with the dominant political ideologies were inevitable and bound to happen in daily teaching and discussions inside and outside of the classroom. With practically every class session dominated by a small vocal group of conservative pro-regime students, open discussions were impossible without the fear of getting more moderate students in trouble.

On the positive side, a lot of good development work was being done across the country, sometimes overshadowing our frustration over all the bad that was going on politically. There was progress on the war front, leading to a stalemate, giving us glimmers of hope that it was going to end soon. There was also some hope that the reformists would prevail and would transform the power structure from within. Like some other colleagues and students, in the early years, I was cautiously hopeful that everything would gradually go back to normal, despite the ambiguous way that the term "normal" was defined in those days.

Amid these optimistic expectations of political and economic stability, and perhaps as an attempt to look for distractions from our challenges at work, a group of us who lived in rental places decided to explore alternative housing options. Eventually, we found an affordable parcel of land in the countryside that the owner was planning to convert to a residential neighborhood. The place, called Tachara, was in the countryside far outside of the Shiraz city limits, about an hour's drive from our work.

The first day that we went to see the land in Tachara, Hossein, my colleague and friend, sat on a short wall made of stacked rocks and pebbles and said, "Beggars can't be choosers!" We all

laughed. In our group of five university professors and one engineer, none owned a house. Hossein did not think much of the land or the plan. He decided to leave the group. The rest of us were hoping that after we built our houses there, in the middle of nowhere, others would follow, leading to further development in the neighborhood as social and economic conditions improved. With so much hope, based on so many assumptions, we signed the contract for the five-house complex.

Our land was situated within miles of vineyards and pomegranate orchards watered by a stream coming out of a *qanat* that was dug decades, or perhaps centuries, before. A *qanat* was an engineering marvel: a long underground stream running through a tunnel under the hills all the way to the lower flatlands in the plains. The underground tunnel had a slight slope, so the water moved slowly for a mile or longer until it was out of the ground. Landowners shared the water on an agreed-upon schedule, based on how many shares they had in the *qanat*. Fights over water and the fairness of the upkeep expenses have a long history in communities that are fed by *qanats* everywhere in Iran.

Tachara was located off the main road out of Shiraz. The vineyards were sandwiched between the main two-lane road on one side and a deep, dry riverbed on the other side that snaked half a mile to a mile away from the road. Each vineyard on that side of the road was separated from the others by short walls of rocks and pebbles stacked together to form a border. These were the rocks taken from the land to make it usable before the trees were planted. The land, however, was still covered by many more. About a mile from the main road, on the opposite side, there was a village, a rural elementary school, and some old and new houses.

I remember the day that we sat in the middle of all the rock-covered rough land, on one of the stacked rock walls, with grapevines and pomegranate trees all around, trying to decide how to proceed. Jamsheed, my friend and former student, had brokered a possible deal with the landowner, who was also a faculty member at the university. We were discussing a strategy to respond to the counteroffer that we had received from his nephew, who was a young architect himself.

A few days after we signed the contract, we met there again, sitting on the rock wall, to talk about how to proceed with the daunting task ahead. We had our lands, but we were in the middle of a war. Building materials were scarce, but we were hopeful that we could get allocated rations for the materials with proper paperwork as soon as our architect had the plans ready. We hired a building contractor whom we knew through a family member. He coordinated all the steps of the building. Our job was to provide the funds needed as the construction proceeded and also to search for the material to buy on rations for every step of the construction process. This took time and energy, but the five of us were able to manage all of that in the months to come. While I couldn't borrow from the bank, I was able to borrow some money from Ali, Manijeh's brother.

My house was the first to finish, as everyone had agreed. Every few weeks after that, another was finished, enabling a member of the group and his family to move in. Manijeh and I moved in first, with our two children, sometime in early fall. Electricity was temporarily extended from the row of lines in the middle of the orchard until months later, when the city powerlines were extended to the new neighborhood. Water was a different story. For that, we had to build an in-ground concrete reservoir in the yard. A tanker would bring fresh water and empty it into the reservoir. I had installed a tank on top of the flat roof, which was filled using an electric pump from the water reservoir. The tank provided water for the kitchen, shower, and so on. We brought drinking water from the city each time we drove home from work in the afternoon, filled at a

public water spigot on the side of the Ghasroldasht Square, a few miles from our neighborhood, on the main road. We kept plastic containers in the car to fill from that spigot and bring home. This always reminded me of my childhood life in Bahmanshir and the water carrier who brought water for us from the river each day. Water for the newly planted trees came from the *Qanat*.

Winter was cold in the countryside. Our house was kept warm by a propane gas heater in the middle of the hallway and small Aladdin kerosene heaters in the rooms. Hardship was easier to tolerate since this was *our* house. We had hired a guard sometime before, who lived on the side of the construction site in a tent with his guard dog. He was a local man from the nearby village, and his presence provided security until other families moved to the new houses. By the end of spring, the other four houses were finished, and everyone had moved in. By the next fall, the city's electricity and water lines were built and connected. Having running water was a great luxury to celebrate. Within two years, the vineyard quickly became a full-fledged neighborhood, with new houses starting almost weekly. Two decades later, when I visited, I was amazed to see a vast urban neighborhood there, with not even one parcel of land empty. All the old trees were gone too.

Despite all the chaos of those years, I have many warm memories of Tachara. Two of my sisters and their families were among the initial five who lived there. They, and the other two neighbors, who were close friends and colleagues, were like a very supportive extended family. We created our own small village! Everyone gathered in one of the five houses most afternoons or evenings after work. Among the ten kids in that dead-end dirt lane, my niece Nasim was the oldest, and my son Cyrus was the next. On most days, we would see them running around the neighborhood, exploring the orchard, or just engaged in games or marching, military style, with Cyrus running the show! Like their parents, the children formed a very close-knit group. Even though that closeness did not fully survive as they grew up and spread around the world, Tachara will always be a place of warm memories for them as well.

In addition to providing a proverbial village to support the children, for me, Tachara and the time I lived there had other importance. Building the neighborhood was an expression of my optimism and hopes for a future that I thought would eventually rise from the ashes of the post-Revolution fires. Its completion denoted our triumph over many adversities and obstacles that all of us had been struggling with. Adding to the excitement, Tachara provided the strongest community I had in my adult life before or in the decades after.

Three years after we moved to our house in Tachara, it became gradually obvious to Manijeh and me that living in Iran was going to be untenable, due to problems at our jobs. I will tell you about two events that practically sealed our fate. By then, we were also very concerned about the future of our two children. Leaving the country was now the only hope of survival, although we didn't know how and when.

Seriously considering that possibility, we put our house on the market to have the needed funds when, and if, the opportunity arose. We moved to a rental house in the same area. That fall, Cyrus started his first grade in the rural elementary school nearby, a school that we knew was not capable of providing a quality learning environment. Now I was in a full state of panic, worrying about his future and uncertain that my job would continue.

Not only did the selling of Tachara house signify our lost hopes and deep pessimism about the future, but it also signaled the loss of a cherished physical community that we had deep emotional ties with.

The emotional impact of abruptly losing that community was, perhaps, more pronounced than

the previous one: losing psychological ties with the larger extended family in Jahrom. As I alluded to before, that loss had happened more gradually and in a different form across two decades, especially after my mother passed away. She was my strongest link to that close-knit community. She, and to a lesser extent, my father, had been anchors keeping me situated in that community and its traditional culture. Paradoxically, both of them had also contributed to the weakening of my links to the traditional community by encouraging me to pursue a different career path and lifestyle through education and migration.

I know that it is hard to understand the enormous complexity of that paradox —a dual worldview, one heavily anchored in traditionalism, while the other strongly encouraging a break from it— and its impact on the lives of the next generation. Perhaps it helps if I describe the life histories of these two anchors in my own life in some detail to help you envision a more complete picture incorporating the interplay of their personalities, the traditional culture of their times, and the rapid social-psychological and material modernity of the early 20th century.

12

Broken Anchors

I am in an elevator, with a hand-held air pump pushing air into my mother's lungs rhythmically every few seconds, silently counting as instructed. My hands are hurting, and the ride seems to take forever. *Does she know what is going on?,* I ask myself. It has been two stressful years since I returned to Iran from the US, and I've often felt I am in a different world. Certainly, the hospital felt as if it were in another world. At that time, Manijeh, Cyrus, and I lived in a second-floor apartment off a busy street near downtown Shiraz. The owner and his family lived on the first floor, and we shared a common entrance to a courtyard. Zahra and Akbar also lived in Shiraz. Akbar was a faculty member at Shiraz University. When the need for my mother's surgery to stop internal bleeding became evident, my sisters and I brought her to Shiraz, which had better medical facilities, also giving us the opportunity to care for her after the surgery.

Mother's life (and mine) had come a long way since the last time I'd lived in Jahrom seven years before. She and my father lived in their own house with my four younger brothers. Their financial situation had improved substantially with the support they received from my sisters and me. Since the Revolution, Father had been hired by *Jahad-e-Sazandegi* (literally translated: The rebuilding Jihad) as a conflict-resolution mediator between farmers in the surrounding rural areas.

Jahrom was slightly more modern than the last time I had lived there, but it was still a highly conservative rural town. By and large, my parents were now the only bridges connecting me to it. Aside from short visits to see them and my younger siblings, I did not have strong links to Jahrom or my extended family anymore, although I cherished my warm childhood memories of the town, many of which centered around Mother and her extended family.

After Mother came to Shiraz, we took her to the old Christian Hospital, now renamed Moslemin. She had surgery early morning, the next day. I went to visit her twice after she was awake that day. On the next day, after a long visit, I went home for a break. That morning, she complained about slight shortness of breath. Her doctor did not find anything wrong. Still, I asked my old college friend Homa, who was also a physician in that hospital, to check on her when she could.

When I returned two hours later, Homa told me that things were terribly wrong. My mom had difficulty breathing, and they needed a specific medicine because they suspected that there was a post-surgery clot in her lungs. Unfortunately, they did not have the medicine, since it was hard to find in the context of the war with Iraq, and vestiges of the US embargo had taken a toll on the health care system. I took the paper prescription and rushed out to a big pharmacy in town that Homa told me might have the medicine.

As I ran out of the hospital, frantically running along the street towards the intersection to flag a taxi, I saw a motorcycle approaching from behind. The man riding slowed down and asked, "What's wrong, Abbas?" It was Behrooz, my old classmate from high school in Abadan, whom I had also run into by accident some time ago in one of the stores near Tachara, where my house was being built. At that time, he told me about his move to Shiraz to be near his aging parents. When he saw me outside the hospital, he was on his way back home from work.

When I told him what was going on, he insisted on giving me a ride in the back of his motorcycle to the pharmacy, about fifteen minutes away. Luckily, that pharmacy had the medicine. Behrooz took me back to the hospital on his motorcycle, zigzagging in traffic. He parked his motorcycle on the sidewalk next to the entrance of the hospital and came in with me. But Mother's room was empty. "They took her to Sa'di Hospital," a nurse told me. That was a big university-affiliated hospital right next to Shiraz University Medical School. Difficult cases—and often terminal patients—were usually taken there because the facilities and the personnel were more extensive. I had terrible memories of that hospital from many years before, when my uncle Rajab was taken there from Jahrom by ambulance. I visited him in the hospital before he passed away. Mother's move to that hospital was bad news.

I was in the back of the motorcycle again, this time going to the dreaded Sa'di hospital. Behrooz dropped me off. He had to go back to work that evening. Rushing towards the emergency room, I shouted my thanks: "I'll never forget your kindness!"

Mother was on a gurney on one side of a huge and very crowded emergency room with my sister Zahra next to her. Nurses were trying to find an available room to transfer her. Apparently, they had the needed medicine and had given her the injection, but it seemed like it was already too late. She was in a coma, and her eyes were wide open. Other than very shallow breathing, there was no other sign of life. Shortly after I got there, I sheepishly closed her eyes, which had remained wide open until then. That was one of the most difficult things I have done in my life, even though I knew it was the right thing to do to prevent her discomfort. I will never forget the deep sense of helplessness, acceptance, and inevitability of that move, just like I was sealing her fate. I had to fight hard to control my tears.

A room was eventually found and prepared in the hospital. A male nurse came and started preparing her bed to be pushed towards the elevator. My brother-in-law, Akbar, was asked to carry the IV bag as we rushed alongside the rolling bed. Since my mother had difficulty breathing, I was given the task of holding and pushing every few seconds on a handheld pump that was connected to a mask on her mouth, counting as instructed. We dashed to the elevator to go to the third floor.

In the elevator, I went back through all my memories of my mother. All her pain, all her struggles, all her years of kindness marching in my head. *Please, God, don't let my hand get tired! I need to continue!,* I prayed silently. And I did continue until the nurse on the third floor took over and connected Mother to a machine. *She's not going to make it*, I told myself with tears pouring down my face. She stopped breathing shortly after we got to the third floor. I sat numb in the corridor outside the room with Akbar and my two sisters, all crying, while two doctors and the nurse tried to revive her. She was pronounced dead soon after.

I was angry at the world. The weight of knowing that this would not have happened in many other parts of the world, such as the US, was crushing. *Why is life so unfair*?, the voice in my head asked ceaselessly. An hour later, anger took over when I opened the door to see her one more time, seeing the two resident doctors stitching her abdomen. They had done an autopsy on her.

This time, I was angry at a system that allowed that without consent. If these people treated a colleague this way, how did they treat others? Sheepishly, they stopped what they were doing while the nurse pulled me out of the room.

I was feeling numb! An unstoppable flood of memories took over my mind. Memories of my early childhood came to life, hitting me with pain. I had felt like that before, when I was nine years old, sitting outside of my aunt's house in Abadan the day that she died. I was in that moment again, feeling alone, lost, and angry at the world.

Mother was gone! I'd never told her explicitly how much I loved her! None of us boys were brought up to express love or most feelings directly like that. Love was in actions, in movements, in gestures. All through my childhood and later, I did not explicitly express love to my mother. It was a given, and there was no need to say it. She knew it, I knew it, and everyone was aware of it. Rarely did I share personal problems with her. Rarely were there opportunities to be alone to share. With nine children, she rarely had time to do anything, much less sit down and listen. That was the norm then and probably the norm in many impoverished places today.

Mother was a simple and content person who could not read or write. She was never given the opportunity to go to school. She was married at a young age, perhaps sixteen or seventeen. It was arranged by her family, as the norm had been at that time. She was taken away from her stable home and a big family to a strange land in which she moved from rental place to rental place every year or two. She had her first child—me—when she was nineteen. There was little in life that she could do beyond taking care of her husband and children, eventually numbering ten. Gholam Ali, the second, died in a tragic accident when he was two years old. By the time Mother was in her thirties, she'd given birth to five more sons, including twins, and three daughters.

She'd had a hard life most of her years. I don't know anything about her life before marrying my father. It is ironic how I never sat down to ask her about her childhood—or I don't remember if I did. But I knew about all the hardships while I grew up. As a child, the oldest child, the first-born son, I had often daydreamed about changing things to make her life easier someday. That wish had given me a strong will to excel and motivation to work as hard as I could and to try to take advantage of any opportunities that came along. That dream, to provide her with a comfortable life, finally came about when I was an adult, but it did not last long for her. It all ended on that dreaded day, in that dreaded hospital. How much I wished the world would be different.

Memories of childhood were racing through my head while I sat on a bench in the hallway of the hospital, weeping. I knew that as our numbers grew, it became harder and harder for my parents to find a place to live until I was nine years old. That was when my mother and we five children moved to my grandfather's house, itself in a ghetto on the other side of the river that bisected the city of Abadan. The move solved one of her problems but added new ones, including the absence of my father for years. Now we were living with the family, grandparents, and uncles in their house, rather than moving from one rental room in someone's house to another. But the new place was far from town, on the undeveloped side of the river, without running water or electricity. There was very limited electricity, feeding one light bulb per household, and that didn't come in until the last year that we lived there —one of the residents bought a big generator and sold electricity to everyone—before our move to the town of Jahrom. Life was different on this side of the river than in the city of Abadan. Even as a child, I was very aware of the disparity and unfairness of life on the two sides of the river. Daydreams of changing everything magically rarely left me during the day.

After we moved from Bahmanshir/Abadan to Jahrom when I was eleven, Mother's life got a bit better. In the first two years, we lived with my maternal grandparents in their house. There was electricity. The water that was pulled by hand from the well in the corner of the enclosed courtyard was good. We were now in a very large extended family, with maternal grandparents, aunts and uncles, and cousins—already a good number that kept growing each year. I told you earlier that there was security in being a part of that metaphorical village. As they say in Iran, "A drop in the ocean is the ocean. If not, a drop is a drop, and the ocean is the ocean." Mother was the drop within that ocean, also connecting me to it. There was comfort for us in being a part of that ocean.

More than a year after we moved to Jahrom, my father returned from Kuwait. We rented a house that had two livable rooms on one side of the courtyard, and two other rooms in ruined state, on the other side. We kept chickens, a goat, and a sheep in those half-ruined rooms. My parents hired workers to build a small brick house on a parcel of land that my maternal grandfather had given to be divided between two of his daughters, one of them my mother. Upon finishing the two rooms, we moved to and lived in that house for two years before my parents sold the house and moved to a bigger place that was nicer, on the outskirts of the town. I was in the last year of high school then, and the new house had a small extra room that was partly assigned to me.

Life was gradually getting better at that time—at least it was more predictable for Mother than before. This was also the time that I was learning about the world outside of the deprived bubble that I was in, also becoming keenly aware of the need and the possibility of getting out of that limiting world. I was questioning life as it was, presumably orchestrated by fate or God. I was aware of the possibility of a different life for myself and everybody in the family, afraid that it would never happen. As the oldest son of a family with nine children, I was constantly worried about my ability to take care of the family in case something happened to my father. My mother didn't seem to be bothered by such thoughts. She was proud of who I was becoming and encouraged me (and my siblings) to push the envelope further.

After I finished high school, while I was away at college in Shiraz, Mother and the family moved once again, finally settling in a bigger house in Jahrom that we owned. My mother lived in that house for seven years, until she passed away. Seven years of stability was a big luxury compared to a move almost every year or two. When you add up all of the moves, in the first eighteen years of her marriage, Mother had moved more than ten times. Also a great luxury, something that I was proud of providing, was not having to do laundry by hand in cold water every day and hanging it on clotheslines in the middle of the courtyard. The clothesline hanging from one corner of the enclosed courtyard to another was one of the constants across all previous houses we had lived in, including this one. But now, at least, she had a small washer. A water heater, refrigerator, and TV were also luxuries that my sisters and I were able to pay for. Her life had improved significantly right before she passed away.

In the midst of all the adversity of the years, Mother was patient, resilient, and resourceful. I rarely heard her complain about life. And she helped make ends meet. She raised chickens and sheep, distilled rose water (and mint water) to sell to neighbors and shops, and sewed all the kids' clothes—dresses and pajamas, you name it. And all of this while taking care of a growing family.

Mother's entrepreneurship bloomed after we moved to Jahrom, since there were more opportunities there, partly due to living in single-family houses (rental or owned) rather than rental rooms in multi-family settings in Abadan/Bahmanshir. In Jahrom, we often had

homegrown eggs, vegetables, goat/sheep milk, and homemade yogurt. In the early years in Jahrom, every morning, the shepherd would pass by our narrow alley, collecting goats and sheep to take to grazing fields. You could hear the bells that were hanging on the necks of goats and sheep when they approached our lane. Some in our neighborhood also had sheep or goats, and the shepherd would collect them all in the morning, for a nominal monthly fee, to take the herd of thirty or forty out to the fields up the hills for grazing. In the evening, the herd walked back, and each goat or sheep was delivered. One of us kids was always there on the main lane to pick up our animals. If not, Mother herself was there to receive the animals. She knew how to milk the goat and the sheep. We almost always had milk. How could one person do all of this?

Sitting in the corridor of the hospital, crying, I remembered that when I was a young child, perhaps five, and later, I found Mother crying every now and then.

"Why are you crying, Mom?"

"No reason!" she would say. "I am all right."

But, despite my lack of experience as a child, I always knew something was wrong. As I grew up, I learned that she cried silently and often for one of two reasons. One was that she was missing my brother Gholam-Ali. She rarely talked about this. The other was that she missed her hometown, her nine siblings, and her parents. She did talk about this one often. "I miss my mom," she would sometimes say, which summarized a lot of sadness for being far from the many people she longed for. She hadn't seen them for a long time. I could understand that easily. We visited Jahrom maybe once when I was three or four years old.

But I also knew that there was another reason for her tears, a burden that weighed on her shoulders, and mine, for what had happened when I was very young. Since the accident that caused it, nothing had remained the same. Even half a century later, as I write this, the memory of that event is fresh in my mind. So are my mother's frequent tears, my feelings of guilt, and the sadness that loomed over the family for years.

I remember the day of the accident. I was four years old. We lived in a rental room in a house on a narrow, dead-end street off Amiri, a main street of the city. I remember playing with a group of other children along that side street every now and then. There was a wooden entrance door connecting the enclosed courtyard in the center of the house to the narrow sidewalk, similar to other houses in the neighborhood. One day, our door was unlatched, and I was able to get out, intending to go to my uncle Hassan's house across the narrow street. He had a big talking parrot in a big cage that I loved looking at and listening to, saying a few words. I remember that I was angry at my brother Gholam-Ali for following me out of the house, ordering him to go back. I was standing on the sidewalk, and he was climbing down the single step at the foot of the door. He was walking behind me when I stepped off the sidewalk into the street to cross to my uncle's house.

I vaguely remember being annoyed and shouting at my brother not to follow me. And that was that! I did not check to see if he had listened or not. A toddler doesn't have the capacity to listen, and a four-year-old does not have the capacity to understand that. I wished I'd known that much. Apparently, I was able to cross the street without a problem. He was not. I am not even sure how much of what I remember is actually a result of my brain reconstructing painful memories based on what I have been told in later years, partly by my mother. Apparently, he followed me right into the street.

"You were a kid, not knowing what was going on," Mother used to tell me. "He followed you to the street. The man driving the donkey-pulled cargo cart could not stop the donkey on time, and the wheel ran over him." She was always careful to let me know that it was not my fault: "You

were only four years old. What did you know?" All the same, the deep guilt settled in early on and never left me. Regardless, I could never muster the courage to talk to my mom about it as a grown-up, to tell her how sorry I was. I am not sure if I was afraid of opening her wounds or mine. Too late now! Sitting in the corridor of the Sa'di Hospital, the weight of all these memories of a lifetime crushed me.

The next day, an ambulance transferred Mom's body from the hospital morgue to Jahrom, where she was buried in a plot in Emamzadeh shrine, near my grandfather. We planted a palm tree next to her grave. She was a gardener all her life, and that tree has been honoring that life for more than 4 decades now.

The burial ceremony and the subsequent events were modest, with the entire extended family and her friends present. In life and in death, she was a part of the proverbial village that she longed for so much when I was a child. She was back home, with her family, this time forever. But with her passing, my strongest bridge to that extended family was suddenly gone. Life never went back to how it was before. My father was, at least for a while, my only standing link to Jahrom and that era of my family's life. As I will tell you below, he was a weak link that got even weaker as time passed by.

Father was a storyteller most of his life, both in Abadan and later in Jahrom. I don't have many memories of my early years in Abadan up to about age six or seven, beyond some foggy recollections of dramatic events such as my brother's death and my circumcision day. I don't even remember anything about Mehregan, the school I went to for first and second grade, except episodes of walking from school to my father's bakery for the storytelling time there.

Those afternoon storytelling sessions are still alive in my memory after decades. The bakery was in a two-part interconnected storefront, each with a huge opening that was closed at night by a metal accordion door that rolled around two cylinders on the top and was pulled down and locked. *Tanoor*, a huge spherical clay oven, was in the middle of the left part, a few feet from the opening at a 90-degree angle to the street. On the right side were stacked bags of flour, two huge tubs for making dough, and a long table for dividing the dough into fist-sized portions by hand. In front of that was a long wooden table with a white tablecloth, separating the store from the sidewalk. It was for the flatbread that the "bread-catcher" would pull off the wall of the clay oven with tongs three or four feet long. Customers often stood in a line in front of that big table and reached to pay as their loaves were pulled one by one from the oven.

The person with the most difficult job in the shop, with a very specialized skill, was the baker (*shaater*). This was the man who would take the ball of dough, flatten it like a large pizza crust, and spread it on a round hand-held stand that was covered by cloth (*navandeh*). Then he would put his hand and shoulder in the oven and stick the dough to the wall of the hot *tanoor* with a jerk and quickly bring out the stand.

Bakery workers, with the shaater (my father, on the left) holding navendeh on his right hand and flattened dough on the left.

That job needed tremendous skill that very few had —acquired after many years of working in a bread-making shop. My dad was a *shaater* most of his adult life. He worked like he was dancing on his feet, taking the dough, flattening it, spreading it, splatting it to the wall of the oven, getting his hand out, and repeating the same rhythm again and again, all day. And he did it day in and day out, in sickness and health, throughout the year, even in the extreme summer heat of Abadan (and later in Jahrom).

The *tanoor* was a sphere made of clay, with a flame-throwing black-kerosene injector spewing fire inside of it through the hole underneath the front. A pipe brought black kerosene to the injector from the tank that was on a tall platform in one corner of the shop. I remember my dad's hair and the hair on his arms were always burned, exposed to the heat of the oven. He started at dawn and ended at dusk, with a long break in between. The break would allow for a late lunch and a short nap at home, returning to tell stories while everyone was waiting for the partitioned dough that was arranged on a long table in rows to rise.

I attended story sessions often during my early childhood years in Abadan and later when I was a teenager in Jahrom. I remember returning from school in the first and second grades in Abadan. I often walked to the bakery for story time. I would sit and listen to my father telling, and sometimes enacting, the story of epic wars he had read in Shahnameh (the Book of Kings), or another thick storybook called Besouye-room (Towards Rome). Shahnameh is the source of many Persian epic and mythical stories from the ancient past. The Besouye room was full of stories about wars between the Persian and the Roman Empires. Father was an excellent storyteller. He read stories every day and told them with much fanfare to others, enjoying a reputation in the community around his shop.

On my way from school, I used to pass a big, crowded tea house not very far from where I lived. Every now and then, I would stop outside the wide doors of the tea house and listen to the professional storyteller who was standing in front of a big open space inside. People sat on rows of wooden platforms inside and outside the tea house. The platforms looked like huge bed frames covered with Persian carpets. Men sat on them cross-legged, drinking hot tea and smoking waterpipes (hookah, or *ghalyoon* in Persian). When it was warm, the doors were wide open, and the rotating fans hanging from the walls kept everyone inside and outside cool. The smell of burned tobacco was strong in the air, and I could hear the storyteller's voice while standing in the opening, next to one of these platforms. I sometimes stayed to listen to the storyteller for a short while before moving on to catch up with my dad's stories.

My father barely had time to talk about anything at home. He had taught himself how to read and write in Persian when he was young, first by learning to read the *Quran* in Arabic and then by reading any schoolbook that he could get his hands on. I don't know much about his childhood, since he never talked about it. One of my regrets in life is that I never explicitly asked him to sit down and tell me the story of his own life before he migrated to Abadan with his two older brothers when he was a teenager. Every day, he would go to work before dawn, come home for lunch and a nap in the middle of the day, then leave again before four to return after dark. In the bakery, he worked nonstop for hours. He and his workers took a short break between the breakfast and lunch rush hours. Iranian families bought their flatbread (all bread was flat, in one form or another) for each meal right before it or in the morning. From early morning to before the noon break, there was nonstop work, per demand.

Starting from my teenage years, I always worried about the difficulty of what my father was

doing, day to day without a break, and the fact that there was no way out. I was always worried about what I would do if something happened to him, since he was the only income earner in the family. By default, as the oldest son, I would have to take care of the family. I didn't have a clue as to what I could do until I at least finished high school to get a job.

When we lived in Abadan during my childhood, income from the bakery was not enough to live even close to comfortably. I am sure that with a family of six (two boys, two girls, Mom, and Dad), finding a room to rent was a big challenge, although as kids, we were not aware of that. Perhaps having to move frequently from one place to another was an indication of rental contracts not being renewed. My guess is that the landlords didn't like big families leasing a room in their houses. In the context of having little and struggling to support the family, it would not have been surprising that my father would get more and more in debt. One day in 1958, when he could not pay the debt or the mounting interest, he closed the shop and left. I do not have any knowledge of the process. I was a second grader, shielded by adults from all the turmoil. He was not back for five years, returning more than a year after we moved to Jahrom.

The Jahrom Bakery opened in 1964, a few months after Dad came back from Kuwait. I am assuming that he had saved enough money working in Kuwait as a bread maker. He rented the space and had a spherical clay oven built in it by an artisan who was brought in from Yazd (a city 350 miles away), staying in our house for a few days. Soon, the bakery was up and running.

I often helped at the shop after school. Later, when I bought a used bicycle, I also helped by delivering the evening bread to some customers' homes. However, as time passed by, my dad discouraged me from working in the shop. He often said, "You need to do your studies so that you don't have to do this in the future." Sometimes he would even get upset at me when I attempted to help. He did everything he could to keep me away from the shop, encouraging me to spend time studying. I have little doubt that if he hadn't done all of that, my world would be a very different one today.

On most days, whoever was at home ate lunch together. School was either in the morning or the afternoon, depending on what shift we were assigned to. We would wait for Dad to come home, especially in the summer when we were not at school. Lunch, the main meal of the day, often consisted of cooked beans and chickpeas with a piece of meat or chicken. The meat was in it more for flavor than being the main ingredient, since a small piece of lamb was cooked in a big pot of beans or peas and potatoes. Chicken was slightly more available, sometimes raised at home. Unlike the old times in Abadan, where we could get fresh fish cheaply, in Jahrom fish was a rare treat imported from far away on ice.

We all sat at the tablecloth on the floor and ate. Flatbread was either dipped in the liquid or cut into pieces and soaked in it, and then the other ingredients were served on top. Dinner was smaller, often consisting of bread and feta cheese or plain yogurt and grated cucumbers with some dates. In the evening, my dad would come home after nine, which was too late for us kids, who had to wake up early the next day for school.

I left Jahrom in 1968 at the end of my high school, when I started college in Shiraz. I would see my family every now and then, perhaps once a month, when I traveled to see them and visit with my extended family. I saw Father and the family less frequently during my almost two years of mandatory military service after college. Returning to Shiraz in 1973 made visits easier, despite my full-time job at that time. Two years later, I left the country to study in the US. It took more than four years to see my parents again when I returned to Iran in 1980. A revolution had happened in Iran by then that had changed their and others' lives drastically. Father had retired

from being a bread maker. Now he was a conflict-resolution elder, working for a government agency that was formed to revitalize agriculture. As an elder, he would intervene in disputes over land and water, two sources of conflict for farmers, herders, and nomads.

After Mother passed away in 1982, Father, Rahman—who was home for almost two years due to the closure of his university—and my three teenage brothers had to take care of themselves, a task that proved impossible in Jahrom. Within months of her passing, we sold their house in Jahrom, bought a small one for them in Shiraz, and moved them. Hossein was the youngest of the three brothers, starting seventh grade. Hadi and Mehdi, the twins, were in their last years of high school, with Mehdi a year behind because he'd failed ninth grade. Unable to transfer his job to Shiraz, Father returned to Jahrom after a few weeks, living in a rental house there.

My three youngest brothers stayed in Shiraz, living by themselves. My sisters Zahra and Zohreh, and my brother Ghodrat, all lived with their families in Shiraz at that time. So, we took turns visiting and taking care of the younger siblings. In the morning, on the way to work, one of us, most often Zahra, took cooked food to their house and left it in the refrigerator for when they returned home from school. Father also visited them frequently. He was eventually able to transfer his job to Shiraz two years later. At that time, he had remarried. He and my stepmother lived in Shiraz for four years and moved back to Jahrom after Hossein, the last brother living at home, left to study engineering at the University of Isfahan. My family and I had already moved out of the country when that happened. I will tell you more about that move later.

In my extended family's history, going back a century, there have been at least five major migrations, each drastically shaping the quality of life for the next generation. My father's move to Abadan in the 1940s was probably the most risky and courageous one. He was a teenager taking a tumultuous journey with his two older brothers. The three of them left the comfort and support of a large extended family to seek new opportunities. In comparison, the migration that started with me in 1968, when I left to attend college in Shiraz and eventually included him and all of my siblings, was slow, taking more than a decade to complete. It was complete when we moved my father and my younger siblings to Shiraz in the early 1980s.

Shiraz provided numerous opportunities for us to grow, significantly impacting my generation and the next. As important as that migration was seen in those decades, I didn't have a clue that a more drastic third wave of migrations was going to follow that would alter my future, as well as that of my siblings and our children. That wave started with my own immigration to the U.S. in 1986 and continued with almost all my siblings' immigration to other parts of the world. I will tell you more about all of that later.

The last time I saw my father was in 2006, twenty years after my move to the U.S. I traveled to Shiraz with my brother Rahman via Doha. Ghodrat drove from Isfahan to join us in Shiraz for a few days. Father was in Shiraz, temporarily staying with my younger brother Hadi. He was not feeling well, suffering from shingles, which caused painful wounds on his chest and stomach. He had also been suffering from stomach pain. His doctor had ordered some tests. When the results were back, he had referred him to an oncologist for consultation.

One morning, we went to see the oncologist together. The doctor's office was a two-bedroom apartment on the second floor, on top of a retail store downtown. The waiting room was a large hallway with two rooms and a small kitchen opening to it, full of people sitting on chairs all around, waiting to be seen. The doctor himself used one of the rooms to see patients. In a large adjacent room, with doors open to the waiting area, we could see beds with patients lying on them, IVs connected to each, hanging from metal bedposts. That was the chemotherapy room.

My father, brother, and I were ushered into the doctor's room when it was our turn. After a few pleasantries, the doctor turned to my father and told him, "Your test results are not conclusive, but they suggest cancer." He went on to explain the possible causes of the pain and symptoms. "We need further tests. Let's hope I am wrong." He ordered more tests to be done before the next appointment scheduled for the following week.

I had to leave Shiraz after a week because I had to return to work. Rahman stayed behind. This is what Rahman told me about the situation after I left: Father did not want to go for the next visit. He wanted to go back to his house in Jahrom. Eventually, Rahman and Hossein promised him that if he went for the visit, they would take him back to Jahrom right from the doctor's office. He went to the doctor, who told him he had liver cancer and needed chemotherapy. When they came out, he asked to be taken back to Jahrom. Rahman and Hossein hired a service car and went to Jahrom directly from there, a three-hour trip.

Despite encouragement from everyone, Father eventually decided not to return to Shiraz for chemotherapy or seek treatment in Jahrom. Rahman stayed for a few more days before returning to the US. Neither of us saw Father again; he passed away a few months later. My stepmother found him lifeless on his prayer mat early one morning. He had passed away during his morning prayer.

Father was born in Jahrom and was buried in Jahrom. He had left in search of a better life almost forty years earlier and had eventually returned home to find it there. Although on the surface that migration could be seen as a failure, I don't have any doubt that it changed his life trajectory, that of the two brothers whom he accompanied, and other members of the family who followed them in the years after. Clearly, the next generation, especially that of my two youngest uncles who grew up in Abadan, was the greatest beneficiary of that migration. Failure or not, I have little doubt that my own views about the world, a continuous drive to excel, and the willingness to seek opportunities elsewhere were all shaped by his migration to Abadan.

After Mother's passing, Father was the last bridge connecting me and my siblings to Jahrom. The bridge vanished when his story came to an end. As time passed, many of my memories of hardship in that town started fading away. All that have remained are sweet memories of my childhood, about the times long gone, people who are no longer there, and places that have been swallowed by the beast of urban development. At the time of my father's passing, Shiraz had already become a place that my eight siblings and I, and our families, called home at one time or another. Even before he passed away, we had already started moving away from Shiraz as well, one by one, escaping the harsh political contexts and/or responding to the allure of better opportunities elsewhere around the world.

13

A New Dawn

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, I saw my father for the last time during my second trip to Iran since my immigration to the U.S. My previous trip to Shiraz had been 25 years earlier (1980) to start my job at the university there, presuming that I was returning to live in Shiraz permanently. When I started that job, the College of Arts and Sciences was located in the middle of a crowded residential area in Shiraz, next to Hafez tomb, a tourist attraction that many locals also visited often. The college was segregated from the rest of the neighborhoods around it with brick walls a few feet tall and an iron fence installed on top of that. A new site for the college had been allocated during the Shah's regime, on top of one of the hills on the other side of town, in a complex that at that time included student dorms, a student union, a restaurant, and some offices.

It was it was during 1984, the fourth year of my service at the university and a year after the reopening, that the first building for the new College of Arts and Sciences was finished, and my department and a few others were moved into it from the old site. Soon, other buildings finished one by one, including the library. My college was now on top of a huge hill that could be seen from miles away. My office was on the top floor of one of the three-story buildings, where the psychology department offices and some classrooms were housed. On most days, I would come to work early in the morning and leave late in the afternoon. The impact of years of stress, uncertainty, and struggle was gradually showing up. I was a nervous wreck, with premature gray hair and weighing less than 140 pounds. The war with Iraq was raging on with no end in sight. Much of my initial optimism had gradually been replaced with the realization that nothing was going to change for the better, at least not the political climate. Daily chores, such as finding rationed groceries to buy for the family, propane gas cylinders for cooking, and gas for the car, were major challenges. Everyone had been assigned coupons for sugar, oil, and rice. You had to find places that had them, though, and stay in line for hours at a time to get them. The other necessities had to be found on the open black market, were still scarce, and were very expensive.

My wife Manijeh's challenges were no better than mine. Life was harder for female faculty due to all the additional scrutiny and interference in how to dress, behave, and so on. She had to put up with a lot at work and in her personal/family life. We had to take care of Cyrus, who began first grade, and Mitra, who was a toddler, while also teaching four courses at the university. Iraq's invasion of the south had left her hometown in ruins, which took a heavy emotional toll on her. Her dad was now a war refugee who had lost everything back in Khoramshar, including his printing shop. As if these were not enough, her younger sister was arrested and imprisoned for being sympathetic to anti-government groups. The future looked bleak for both her sister and her dad.

Manijeh was stronger than me! Despite all of these challenges, she seemed to be handling our day-to-day and longer-term problems better than I. Nevertheless, problems and uncertainties were taking a toll on both of us and the larger family. Cyrus was in a rural school that we knew was inferior, but there was little we could do about that. Private schools were not readily available anywhere near us. In retrospect, even if we could have found one, we could not afford it. We were very concerned about the future of our children.

I struggled with all the stresses and uncertainties. Feeling very depressed and anxious, I smoked nonstop, oblivious to the impact on everyone around me at work and at home. Students, colleagues, and family members never complained about that. Decades later, when I think about those days, I feel strong guilt and shame.

The next blow came a year later, when we were in our most vulnerable state, trying to cope with all of these problems. It was approaching my sixth year of employment as a faculty member, required to apply for promotion and tenure that year. By default, without tenure, my probationary period would end, and I had to leave the university within a set amount of time. Not having an option to support my family should that happen was a constant worry on my mind.

My promotion and tenure process progressed positively from the department and through the committee within the College of Arts and Sciences. I had a strong case, given my broad and effective teaching experience and extensive publication record. However, like universities in the US, the final step of approval included the provost. My file was forwarded to him for approval. After a few weeks of waiting, I was notified that the provost had denied my tenure and promotion.

On a hot summer day, I made an appointment with the provost to discuss my dossier and see why he had turned down my promotion. When I entered his office, I found him sitting behind a huge mahogany desk. The office was nicely decorated and quite large, which was intimidating. I explained politely that I had published extensively in my field, both in Iran and in reputable professional outlets abroad. I mentioned my good teaching, including the engagement of many students in my research projects, and my good service to the university and to the community. I also pointed out that my promotion had been supported unanimously at all levels from the department to the college and up. "I am puzzled," I said. "Why was my promotion and tenure denied?"

The provost calmly pointed to a stack of papers in the corner of his desk. "Dr. Tashakkori, do you know what that is?" he asked. Obviously, I did not have a clue and indicated so very uncertainly. "These are reports of anti-revolutionary comments you have made in classes."

I could not believe my ears. I didn't know what was written in those reports. Presumably, informants had selectively reported what I had said in my classes, at least what I had said that they believed to be anti-revolutionary. I knew that in my classes, I had been discussing politically sensitive topics such as socialization, attitude change, censorship, propaganda, and the dangers of changing the educational system into a brainwashing machine. How can you teach social psychology during a major international embargoes and a devastating war, and not talk about psychological warfare? But I had also tried to be as politically neutral as possible in these discussions, even though I knew that I was not neutral in my thinking. Apparently, despite these efforts, some conservative students had been threatened by these discussions and had put pressure on the university to react[9]. I had not been successful in remaining neutral or in keeping a low profile! If things were bad already, psychologically, they got worse after that day.

A few months after that, one Thursday afternoon, one of Manijeh's students who worked with the Revolutionary Guards came to our door on his motorcycle. He talked to Manijeh briefly

outside the door and left in a hurry, presumably being an informant doing her a favor. He warned her that our house was going to be raided by the security services that night or soon.

The entire family was suddenly in a state of alert. I shredded the newspaper article I had written some time ago, along with the handwritten draft of a textbook on attitude formation and change. The book was full of current examples that could be used against me. We soaked hundreds of pages of writing, mostly handwritten, in water, squeezed them into balls, and threw them in the disposal well that was under a removable concrete cover in the middle of our kitchen. It took hours to shred everything by hand. Everyone in the family helped, including the children. Manijeh and I waited for the raid all night. But it did not happen. Either the intelligence was wrong, or they had changed their minds. There was no way for us to know. In retrospect, when I thought about it many years later, it could have been a setup, a warning to me by those in charge to self-censor.

By the end of the summer of 1985, it was increasingly evident to Manijeh and me that there was no future for us and our children in Iran. Thankfully, instead of accepting the sense of despair that followed that recognition, we were motivated to seek alternatives. I started intense communication with several places in the US about the possibility of a faculty position or postdoctoral research support. Adding to uncertainties, we had to find a solution to another problem: not having new (Post-Revolution) Iranian passports and exit permits. Both were required for leaving the country, and had been difficult to obtain in the past years. However, a recent easing of restrictions could allow travel abroad for presenting at scientific conferences. So Manijeh and I submitted papers to a few international conferences, hoping to get acceptance letters that we could use for obtaining exit documents.

Within months, I got an offer from the US. I had submitted a proposal to a family research center in Tallahassee, Florida, to bring collected data from my research projects to incorporate into a multicultural study of family structure. I had received final confirmation for a two-year grant-funded postdoctoral fellowship there. Manijeh and I started planning for our exit. We had already sold our house in Tachara and rented a place nearby.

Everything seemed to be proceeding as expected until the next ax fell. When I called Tallahassee (by going to the telecommunication office in Shiraz) to see what paperwork remained to be done for my U.S. visa, I was told that the scholar whom I was going to be working with, and who was going to fund my postdoctoral fellowship, had been in a fatal car accident. The grant that was going to fund my postdoc was gone. The hope and excitement of a way out vanished overnight.

Making telephone calls to the US was a big hurdle. I had to go to the city's Communication Center, wait for the operator to dial the number after it was my turn in line, and speak loudly inside a cubicle. Regardless, I was able to reach a few people I knew and informed them of the situation. I had already submitted an application, including a multi-component research grant proposal, to the Carolina Population Center (CPC), a prestigious research unit of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Vaida, my previous doctoral mentor, got involved as well. In the spring of 1986, I received an official postdoctoral fellowship offer with a modest salary from the CPC.

A few months before this, a research paper that Manijeh and I had co-authored was accepted for presentation at the International Council of Psychologists in Istanbul. When we received a formal invitation letter to present at the conference, both of us had applied for exit permits and passports to go to Turkey in June. Turkey was a friendly country, the political situation had improved a bit, and the borders that were closed after the Revolution were partly reopening. Some

travel restrictions were lifted for those who had a reasonable justification to travel abroad. After weeks of waiting and follow-up, Manijeh and I got our passports and exit permits. We were then allowed to buy our airplane tickets.

When we bought tickets to fly to Istanbul a week before the conference, we were hoping to apply for U.S. visas when we got there, and fly to the US, rather than return to Iran. We were hoping that we didn't have to stay in Turkey for more than a week or two. Later, on second thought, we decided to see if we could fly from Istanbul to Germany and apply for US visas there. That way, we could stay with my brother-in-law Ali and his family in Bad Lauterberg, avoiding the cost of waiting in Turkey for our U.S. visas. Giving up on the Revolution, Ali (a staunch revolutionary himself) and his family had moved back to Germany two years before, and he worked as a physician in the hospital there.

To get visas to Germany, I made an appointment with the German consulate in Tehran via phone. I was concerned that if it were known that we were planning not to return to Iran, we would have trouble getting our German visas. Also, the prospect of getting visas to the US was uncertain due to continued political conflicts between Iran and the US. Nervous, late in the spring, I traveled by bus to Tehran, showing up for the appointment at the German consulate the next morning. A staffer greeted me shortly after I arrived and asked me to follow her to a meeting room. I explained in detail who I was and what I had gone through. I also told her about my postdoctoral position offer in the US, my permit to go to Istanbul with my family, and my hope to travel from Istanbul to Germany to apply for a US visa.

The consular staff patiently and kindly listened, examined my documents as I spoke, looked at my publications, and carefully inspected the letter of offer for the funded postdoctoral fellowship at the Carolina Population Center. She left the room and returned after fifteen minutes to let me know that she would give us visas to Germany. She also asked why we did not plan to fly directly to Frankfurt rather than going through Turkey. I hadn't thought about that possibility. another act of kindness, by a total stranger!

Upon returning to Shiraz, I bought another set of tickets to fly directly to Frankfurt for Manijeh, me, and our two children, hoping to somehow skip the trip to Turkey and notify the conference accordingly when we got to Frankfurt. Since our exit documents were for a trip to Turkey, we kept the first set of airline tickets as a precaution, just in case we needed them for going through the initial security checks at the airport.

I was ready to leave everything behind. At work, my closest students knew that something was going on, although I hadn't told them explicitly. I had closed the projects they were working on. I had a copy of a cartoon on my wall that described my state of mind those days, hidden in plain sight. It was a cage, with the door open and a bird flying out. The caption said, "The bird will not return until ..."[10] . Little did I know at that time that the bird was not going to return, period.

International flights from Tehran were usually scheduled in the early hours of the morning. Our Istanbul flight was supposed to depart at 3:30 a.m. a week before the conference. My family and I showed up at the airport and went through all the security checks before midnight. If asked why our children were with us, we were ready to say that we could not leave our two young children alone back home. Nobody cared to ask. After going through all the security checks in the international terminal, instead of checking in for the Istanbul flight, we checked in for Frankfort and anxiously proceeded as planned to the related gate. The four of us were on the flight to Frankfurt shortly after 1:00 a.m. with only two suitcases checked in.

Sitting in the airplane, I thought about all the events of the previous six and a half years, since

our return to Shiraz from the US. Our naïve optimism had been replaced with feelings of dread and helplessness. How difficult it had been to build a life, and how easily we dismantled it and left. The jobs in which we had invested so much of our lives were gone. Gone was the house that we built in Tachara with so much effort and hope —it was sold to fund our trip. We had sold our car right before leaving. The rental house was still in my name, only to keep appearances as normal as possible. We didn't want to publicize that we were leaving for good, fearing interference with our exit. Our belongings remained in the house for my siblings to sell after we were out.

Looking out of the window at the early morning red sky, the only things I could see forever were white clouds rushing under the plane. A perfect analogy for our lives at that moment. We were rushing towards a hopeful and exciting, albeit uncertain, future to start building everything from scratch, all over again. How sad it was to leave everything and everybody behind! How much I wished I could find a corner to sit and cry!

14

A Fresh Start

When we left Iran, our assumption was that we would take a week or two in Germany to obtain our US visas, and then fly from Frankfurt to New York. Like many other assumptions in that period of life, this one also proved to be wrong. Our stay in Germany lasted much longer, drowned in nerve-racking uncertainty.

The ordeal started with my going from Bad Lauterberg to Frankfurt to apply for U.S. visas two days after we arrived in Germany. I showed up at the U.S. consulate on a Thursday morning, hopeful to do all the needed paperwork and return to Bad Lauterberg that day. I was caught off guard when I was told by the security staff at the gate to return next Wednesday, since the consulate dealt with Iranian citizens on Wednesdays only. I returned to the US consulate early morning the next Wednesday, only to be told by the guard that I could not go inside. "Iranians are not allowed," he said. "Only a limited number of permissions are given out in the morning, and they are all gone. Please come back next week."

From a public phone in Frankfurt, I called the consulate, trying to talk to someone to explain my situation. As soon as I told the person on the phone that I had an Iranian passport, he would hang up on me. I returned to Bad Lauterberg again and faxed a letter to the US consulate, explaining that I had a two-year postdoctoral offer, hoping to get to Chapel Hill on time to start. I asked for an appointment or a phone call to help me apply for a visa. I waited for the next few days, but there was no response.

I took the train to Frankfurt again, this time on a Tuesday afternoon. I slept in a bed-and-breakfast place and was in line at the embassy at 5 a.m., assuming that I was early enough to be allowed in. There was already a big group of people in line. I think I was number seventy-five, or perhaps higher. When the embassy opened, they allowed fifty or seventy people in and closed the gate. No luck, until next Wednesday.

Now I was in a state of complete panic. The entire week, I tried again in vain to get to someone in one of the other consular offices by phone or fax to see if I could get an appointment. Frankfurt was the only place, and only on Wednesdays. So, I went back again the next Tuesday evening, intending to stand in line the entire night. When I arrived that late afternoon, I found many people there, already forming a line with rugs and sleeping bags on the ground. When the morning came, I was out of luck again. The line that seemed short had swelled by the time the kiosk was open for handing in numbers.

Desperate, I went back to Bad Lauterberg, not knowing what to do next. Perhaps I could be in Frankfort two days earlier and sleep on the street? But that was not possible without someone with me to alternate time for necessities. Eva, my sister-in-law, who was back from summer vacation, knew the travel agent on the village square. She went there and shared my story with

her, asking for advice. The travel agent told her that if we bought airplane tickets to the US from her, she might be able to use that as a reason to call and get me an appointment. A day after we bought our tickets from her, she called to tell us that I had an appointment in Hamburg the next week.

The trip from Bad Lauterberg to Hamburg, mostly by train via Northeim and Hanover, took about four hours. I left early in the morning and was in the consulate around 11 AM after a brief bus ride and a 10-minute walk, holding a map in hand. I had struggled with English and broken German to find out how to get there from the station. I found out that morning that the world was full of kind people who were willing to help, especially if it gave them a chance to practice their English!

Despite my apprehension, the encounter with the guard at the door was pleasant here, unlike in Frankfort. Upon confirming that I had an appointment and checking my documents, he accompanied me to a receptionist in the building. The woman on the other side of the glass window gave me a multipage form on a clipboard to fill out and asked me to sit in the waiting room. Nervously, I struggled to answer the form's huge number of questions about the four of us: myself, Manijeh, Cyrus, and Mitra. Finally, I submitted the paperwork back to the receptionist and returned to the waiting area.

After a long time that felt like an eternity, someone opened a door and called my name, asking me to follow him inside. While pointing to a chair on one side of a long table, he said, with a serious face, "You have done something illegal, sir. We can't give you a visa." My world came to a complete stop. It was over! *What am I going to do now?* He saw the look of panic and desperation on my face. I guess that I had suddenly turned as pale as a ghost. His serious face changed into a laugh: "*I* am just kidding! You have applied for a visa for a US citizen. You can't do that." Now I was totally confused and let him know. He calmly continued. It happened that under stress, I had applied for a visa for Cyrus, not realizing that he was a US citizen by birth. *How stupid can you be?* I asked myself.

He gave me back the letter of postdoctoral appointment from the University of North Carolina. "You are a Tar Heel, huh?" Surprised, I told him yes. Very few people use the term to identify a University of North Carolina alumnus, unless they are themselves a Tar Heel. He knew from the completed forms that I had taught at UNC. "And you taught there, right? What did you teach?" I politely told him that I had taught social psychology and statistics in 1978 and 1979, before I left for Iran. "Were your classes on the third floor of Davie?" Now in shock, I said yes, clearly with a questioning tone. He said, "My Psych 33 was in one of those *classrooms.*"

Suddenly, a thousand thoughts were running through my head. *How small can the world be? What are the odds*? We chatted about UNC and Chapel Hill for a few minutes before he stood up and left the room, telling me he would return shortly. He returned after an eternity and asked, "Where is Cyrus?" I explained that he was with my wife and daughter in Bad Lauterberg. "Go bring him here. Be here tomorrow at eleven. Can you do that?"

The return to Bad Lauterberg felt shorter than the earlier trip that day. Now I was excited and hopeful, despite being very tired. I dozed off between train and bus changes. It was late in the afternoon when I finally arrived and shared the hopeful news with everyone. Cyrus and I could take the 4:30 AM train to be in Hamburg on time. However, Eva didn't think that was right, offering to drive us, leaving after breakfast: "It takes less than three hours to get you there," she said. Driving fast on the autobahn the next morning, the trip was shorter than that. She dropped us off at the consulate before heading back to make it to work. Another act of kindness to

remember for life!

Cyrus and I were allowed in at our appointment time. The same officer who had interviewed me called us to the meeting room. He asked Cyrus a few questions, but Cyrus did not know any English. I explained that we had left the US when he was two years old, and we had not spoken English to him since then. So, the officer asked me to translate. "What is your name, son?" and "What is the name of your mom?" After a few more questions, the officer left the room, asking us to wait.

He came back more than half an hour later. When he gave us the news, I had a hard time stopping myself from jumping up and down and shouting with joy. Three of us had our U.S. visas, and Cyrus had his entry document. We said goodbye to my fellow Tar Heel and headed back to the train station to return to Bad Lauterberg.

The next day, the travel agent was able to secure seats for us to fly from Frankfurt to New York. We took the train to Frankfort a few days later, early in the morning. Another uncertain chapter of life was closing, leading into a new one to wrestle with.

The Lufthansa flight from Frankfurt to New York was pleasant. We were happy and excited about what was ahead, although both Manijeh and I knew that life was about to get even more challenging, since we had to start our professional lives from scratch, on limited-term visas. I was worried about the challenges of transitioning from a respected faculty status, with many publications and years of experience, to a postdoctoral fellow, starting all over again. I felt like the person rowing a canoe against a river in Fritz Heider's example: our attribution of ability and effort to that person is greater than someone who is paddling along the current. I knew that up to that moment in life, I had survived paddling against currents for years. The question on my mind was, will I survive the strongest current that is just coming up?

We arrived in Chapel Hill on a hot and sunny day in August of 1986. The city had not changed much since the last time we were there, almost seven years earlier. As expected, the first weeks were hectic: much to learn or relearn and a lot to do. We rented a two-bedroom apartment off Estes Drive on the second day of our arrival and started looking for used furniture and beds. Camping-style, the kids were happy to sleep on the floor for a few days until we could get everything in order. Life started to establish a routine, day by day. My old classmate Caryl, who was now a faculty member at UNC, gave me an old Tandy computer. It was like a small suitcase with a handle, a tiny monitor, and an operating system on a floppy disk. That was a tremendous help in my starting research and writing, and another act of kindness to pay forward in the future! We bought a used TV, where the children watched Sesame Street and other programs for hours on end, learning English before school started.

It had been more than a decade since I was first accepted to study psychology at the University of North Carolina. Chapel Hill had remained my favorite small town in the US, perhaps as dear to me as Abadan and Shiraz had been in Iran. I had many joyful memories of my graduate school years, peers, professors, and the places here, since I had been to Carolina many times in my mind during the previous years (to quote James Taylor's song). When in Chapel Hill again, memories of the challenges and difficulties of the past months started to slowly fade away.

Consistent with the name, Chapel Hill is on a green and lush hill with many old oak trees. Truly the Southern Part of Heaven, as it is nicknamed, after William Meade Prince's description of the town in the 1950s. It is a liberal town in the middle of conservative countryside, a few hours' drive from the Blue Ridge Mountains, where I had camped many times, years ago, with Manijeh, Zahra, and Akbar. In the opposite direction, it took a few hours of driving to get to the Outer Banks and

the beaches, where I had also camped. It felt like I had returned to my hometown, although that feeling gave me a tinge of guilt for betraying my birthplace and the loved ones left behind in Iran.

Returning to Chapel Hill evoked a mix of simultaneous conflicting feelings: hope, uncertainty, stress, longing, excitement, and pain, all at the same time. Sadly, I was now an "alien" in a new world, again. When I had left, almost seven years before, life was drowned in the news about the uprising and Revolution back home. The Islamic Revolution happened when I was still in graduate school at the University of North Carolina. International news media were bursting with constant reports of strikes, demonstrations, crackdowns, torture, and killings during the Revolution.

When the Revolution finally succeeded, the news brought much hope with it: the "Spring of Freedom" was being optimistically discussed, amid the promise of a new era without the fear of SAVAK, the Shah's notorious secret service. When I left Chapel Hill in the last days of 1979, I was eager and ready to participate in the building of the new republic, even though that republic was going through self-inflicted pains of international condemnation due to a hostage crisis. As I told you in the previous chapters, not long after I had left Chapel Hill, my optimism started to wane with the crackdown on intellectuals, the impeachment of the president in June of 1981, and the closure of the universities for three years. John Dewey, the American philosopher and psychologist, once wrote, "When the world does not make sense, examine your assumptions." The post-revolution world did not make sense anymore because I, and many others like me, had made so many assumptions that proved to be wrong as time went by.

Now, I was back in Chapel Hill, restarting my career as a postdoctoral researcher. I didn't have an office in the psychology building, but I met with Vaida—my old adviser and my postdoctoral sponsor—often as we worked on research papers. My office was on the side of the campus, downtown, on Franklin Street, on the fifth floor of a brick building. Being a postdoc in a high-power research unit was intimidating and stressful. Research productivity was my only way to survive. Most days, I worked between ten and twelve hours, with a few breaks in between to take care of the kids. In two years, I had multiple papers published or accepted for publication, some collaboratively with Vaida. I also secured a research grant from the Rockefeller Foundation.

Time was running out fast, putting me close to the end of my two-year visa and financial support. My visa included a one-year extension that I could use to find a job and apply for a green card (permanent residency). Unfortunately, the stock market crash of 1987 sank the entire economy, making it almost impossible to find a job. Being on a temporary visa made it even harder to compete in the tough job market. I applied for some sixty-five positions in universities and research organizations, without luck. Deep depression slowly took over. Vaida always tried to encourage me by saying, "It only takes ONE offer to change all of this. It will come!" She was proven right after months of despair!

While all of this was going on, Manijeh was able to convince Duke University to allow her to defend her dissertation despite the time lapse due to our previous move back to Iran. She succeeded and got her doctorate. She also secured her clinical practice license for North Carolina. At the end of our second year in the US, she was able to find a job in a state institution for the intellectually handicapped. I also received three invitations for job interviews. Two were for research positions in Washington, DC, and at the University of Pennsylvania. The other was for a teaching job at Stetson University in DeLand, Florida. After the interview visits, I got job offers from all three. I liked the living conditions in Florida better, and took the Stetson job as an entry-level assistant professor. Manijeh and I decided to split the family: She and Mitra staying in North Carolina, and Cyrus and I moving to Florida.

The visa worries were easing. However, after many years of work and with many publications in national and international journals, I was now a beginning-level assistant professor again. I considered myself lucky to have gotten a job that seemed promising. As a part of my job offer, Stetson University's lawyers filed the paperwork for permanent residency (Green Card) on my behalf. Manijeh, too, had already filed for a change of visa based on her new job, with legal fees paid by us. That application was granted earlier, giving both of us permanent residency, prompting a withdrawal of the Stetson one at the end of the fall.

Deland was a nice southern college town, midway between Daytona Beach and Orlando. It was a small town with many moss-covered oak trees and citrus orchards that had recently been hit by a frost wave and largely abandoned by the owners. Stetson University was located in the center of town, with a few thousand students and faculty. It was a small college with a strong emphasis on good teaching and working with students. I was used to that from years of teaching in the US and Iran before my recent postdoctoral period, although the necessity of abandoning my research and writing activities frustrated me. In my previous work in Iran, I was engaged in multiple research projects, most of them collaborative with my students, despite a heavy teaching load each semester.

When I moved to DeLand, I liked the area so much that I told myself I was going to stay there permanently, or at least for years. After a long period of uncertainty and moves, I yearned for some stability. Due to the economic downturn, home prices were reasonable in Deland, and I was worried that things would change soon. So, I put an offer on a small house and purchased it with a mortgage loan from a local bank. It was a small one-story building in a secluded subdivision with oak trees all around.

Soon after moving to the new house, I planted orange trees in the front and back yards, creating some familiarity with my past life in Iran, and the places I had lived in. To me, that house was a small piece of heaven. My work environment at Stetson was pleasant. I had good colleagues and motivated students. One of my challenges was making sure Cyrus was okay, both at home and at school. I didn't know how to be a single parent, especially in a social and cultural setting that I didn't know much about. The other challenge was my persistent depression that would not go away: I was utterly lonely.

Going to elementary school in Deland, Cyrus had to adjust to his new school and living environment and to being away from his mother and sister. I had to hire one of my students regularly to watch him after school when I had a class or a meeting. I struggled with taking care of him. The fact that Mitra was far away bothered me greatly, too. She and Manijeh came to visit once or twice while I lived in Deland. Both were also there for Christmas, along with my sister and her family. I was also able to drive to North Carolina with Cyrus a few times when his school schedule allowed.

I faced another challenge in my personal life: I had colleagues, but no friends. During the time that I worked and lived in Deland, I never saw a colleague's house or went to lunch or dinner with them. I was an outsider on the edge of a close-knit community that consisted of a small group of faculty who were mostly living on the outskirts of the campus in subdivisions or in the small town, each engaged with their own social circles, many going to the same church on Sundays. I was an immigrant (officially, a "resident alien"), unfamiliar with much of the social scene or unable to participate. Most of the time, I was either in my office on campus or at home working and taking care of Cyrus.

In the context of these challenges, life was quite challenging. To top it off, I was also struggling

financially since my salary was low, not much higher than what I was previously paid as a postdoc. Regardless, the gradual prospect of certainty and stability was replacing my previous year of constant panic. A cognitive consequence of that change was a shift from external battles of the previous years to internal ones. I was feeling lost and didn't know how to deal with it or what to do next. A call from Charles —my graduate school friend and officemate whom I told you about before—provided an option. As I will share with you next, it changed my life trajectory in ways I had never envisioned before.

15

Crossing the Metaphoric Bridge

Charles's telephone call came near the end of my second year at Stetson. We had kept in touch before, both while I was out of the country and since I returned to the US. The last time I had talked to him was in December, during Christmas. Charles had gone back to Louisiana when he finished his doctoral program. He was now an associate professor at LSU, teaching master's- and doctoral-level research methods and program evaluation courses. I had not visited him since I came to the US, but we had kept each other up-to-date about our lives.

This latest phone call, however, was not personal; it was official business. After a few pleasantries, he said, "We have been searching for an assistant or associate professor to help us teach research methods and statistics courses." Apparently, the faculty member who was in that position left abruptly. "So far, we have not been able to find anyone we liked," he added. He went on to tell me in detail the story behind the departure of that professor, leading to the start of a late search process that had not yielded a desirable shortlist. "I know you just moved to Florida and bought your house, but I thought you might be interested in applying."

We talked at length about the job and how it was different from what I was doing at that time. If selected, I would be qualified to become an associate professor, a major promotion, given my extended academic history. "It will give you an opportunity to go back to research and publishing with doctoral students, rather than teaching four courses per semester to undergraduates," Charles advised. And of course, this was also a possible opportunity for me to collaborate with him again, this time on program-evaluation projects that he was heavily engaged in at the state level.

About a week after I mailed my application packet overnight, I received a call from the search committee chair inviting me to go to LSU for the job interview that he said would include "a research presentation, teaching a session of a doctoral statistics class, and meeting with the students, faculty, the department chair, and the dean." Nervously, on a Wednesday afternoon, I flew from Orlando to Baton Rouge, leaving Cyrus at home with a student of mine whom I had hired before as a babysitter. I was happy to see Charles that afternoon, after so many years. The next day, my research presentation and teaching went well, leading to engaged questions and discussions by both faculty and doctoral students. I liked the few faculty members whom I met or had discussions with during the visit.

Early in the afternoon on Friday, before leaving for the airport, I had my exit meeting with the department chair. "The students and faculty liked your presentations and are excited about what you can do here," he said. "The search committee met this morning, suggesting that we offer you the job. I have talked to the dean, and he is on board with that, authorizing me to offer you the job." After a rather lengthy summary of what the job entailed and his expectations of the person

in that position, he explained that, given my research and teaching experiences, I would be hired as a non-tenured (probationary) associate professor, to be evaluated for tenure in my third year of service. After years of struggling as an immigrant, not being recognized for my scholarly history and teaching experiences, the offer would get me closer to where I was qualified to be, compared to my peers.

The next few days were tough. I talked to Manijeh. She was willing to move to Baton Rouge to seek a new job after applying for a Louisiana psychologist license. She was not happy with her current job in the institution for the mentally handicapped. I talked to Charles again and consulted with Vaida and with my then-current department chair at Stetson. Eventually, I signed the acceptance letter and sent it back to LSU. Within weeks, I put my house on the market, packed everything, and moved with Cyrus to a rental house in Baton Rouge. The house in Florida was sold a few months later.

That August, I also went to North Carolina to move Manijeh and Mitra to Baton Rouge. I had a history of conflicted feelings about my marriage. *Old wounds will be open again*, I told myself. Nevertheless, I was convinced that the move was the right thing for everybody. I was hopeful that everything would turn out okay. One of my regrets in life is making that optimistic assumption about myself. Manijeh was a good person and a good friend. But, to me, that did not seem enough. I was aimlessly searching for something different in life. Exacerbating the problem, my persistent depression continued to cast a dark cloud over everything in my life, including my marriage.

Unfortunately, within months, we realized that the East Baton Rouge public school that we'd enrolled Cyrus in was terrible. Another example of judgment failure due to not being well familiar with how the culture and the school system worked. Concerned about the wisdom of moving the children there, Manijeh and I were not able to find a solution. To top that off, her efforts to get the Louisiana license for private practice were not getting anywhere.

The stresses of all of this were added to an already tense relationship. Eventually, by the end of the second school year, I asked for a divorce. Manijeh had been applying for jobs in North Carolina and was able to get a position as a psychologist in a center for elder care. Right before the start of the new school year, we moved her, Cyrus, and Mitra to Chapel Hill. Chapel Hill schools were great, certainly much better than what we had in Baton Rouge. Moving Cyrus and Mitra was, perhaps, the only positive outcome of the divorce that I could think of. That, and also keeping them together. They stayed in Chapel Hill until both graduated from high school.

From then on, I drove thirteen hours –mostly overnight— to Chapel Hill every few weeks to visit for a weekend. For some holidays, I brought Cyrus and Mitra to Baton Rouge, sometimes taking detours to see other places. We visited many places in the South, from the Carolinas to Georgia beaches and Florida. Long-distance phone conversations were not as inexpensive as today, so I did not get a chance to talk to them as often as I would have liked. Aside from providing financial support, there was little I could do to help Manijeh. I knew it was hard for her to hold a full-time job and take care of the two kids.

Despite an emotionally taxing beginning, from some points of view, Baton Rouge provided a decade of relative stability, giving me a chance to catch my breath and reflect on all that had happened in my life in the previous decade. It also provided ample opportunities to work hard so that I could reach the professional level consistent with my credentials. I was happy to contribute to the professional and personal growth of a cadre of advanced master's and doctoral students who were eager to learn. Adding to all of that, at a personal level, I gradually found myself in a close-knit community of friends who met regularly, shared much, and played tennis at least once

or twice per week.

One of the consequences of my reflection and reanalysis during the first few years of living in Baton Rouge was the emotional acceptance that I would not be going back to Iran. In academic circles, there is an assumption that immigrants continue hoping to go back to their original land throughout their lives. Some have questioned this, calling it a myth about immigrants. Myth or not, up to that point in time, somewhere in the back of my mind, I was hopeful that things would change in Iran, and I'd go back. Also lingering in the back of my head was the knowledge that I was a "resident alien" (i.e., a green card holder) here, giving me a sense of being temporary. Becoming a U. S. citizen would change that, would make Mitra a citizen, and would also potentially facilitate the immigration of others in the family whom I could sponsor in the future.

Despite the desirability of anticipated consequences, the decision to apply for citizenship was not emotionally simple. Even the thought of such a move had made me feel guilty before. I have often wondered if I was the only immigrant who felt like a traitor when it came to giving up his or her citizenship. I didn't have an answer then, but now I know that for some (perhaps many?) immigrants, deciding to change citizenship is the ultimate act of severing one's roots to a heritage that had been a source of comfort and pride, feeling like a betrayal of one's beloved "motherland."

In the midst of all of these conflicting emotions, in my third year of living in Baton Rouge, I applied for citizenship. It took some time before I was asked to go for an interview and a test. A few weeks later, I received a letter notifying me of approval and instructing me to attend a swearing-in ceremony in New Orleans.

My friends were all excited that I was going to be a naturalized citizen. Dianne and Kim decided to attend the swearing-in ceremony with me, picking me up at 7 a.m. to drive to New Orleans. We arrived at the ceremony venue shortly after eight, joining sixty or seventy other applicants and their guests in the auditorium.

We were on our way back to Baton Rouge before noon. Sitting in the back seat of the car, I was silent, paradoxically sad and happy at the same time. The crushing uncertainties of almost a decade were finally over. I had made relentless efforts to get to that point. The new citizenship had the promise of security and stability. I was, however, surprised to find myself deeply sad, fighting tears. There was a strange sense of finality in my heart. I was mourning the loss of a culture and a country that I valued so much and dearly loved. With it came the anger, both at myself and at the people, the political system, and the circumstances that had turned my life upside down, compelling me to move away.

Perhaps noticing my silence, Dianne, who was driving, said, "This is great, Abbas! I am happy for you. You are now a real American!" We all laughed at her strong emphasis on the word "real." Almost simultaneously, Kim said, "Yes, congratulations!" I broke my silence to thank both. "Now you can register to vote, right?" Dianne said. With my affirmative response, Kim asked, "Okay, who are you going to vote for next month: the Crook or the Nazi?" All of us laughed at the joke that wasn't a joke. That gubernatorial election was a race between Edwin Edwards, who was already convicted of corruption, and David Duke, who was the ex-leader of the KKK. My favorite bumper sticker on cars all around town was "Vote for the Crook, not the Nazi!" The irony never escapes me that when the time came for my first vote as a US citizen, I knowingly voted for a crook!

One Saturday afternoon in the following spring, after a game of tennis, Charles asked me if I had thought about buying a house: "You are now a U.S. citizen and a tenured associate professor

living a new life in Baton Rouge within a community of close and supportive friends," he said. "There is a nice house for sale not far from where I live. Let's go see it tomorrow, if you like."

Two months later, I closed on and moved to that house. It was a modest 3-bedroom house in a quiet, family-oriented neighborhood covered by tall oak and pecan trees. It had a large backyard where I could enjoy gardening, my favorite activity. My brother Rahman (who had started graduate school at LSU two years earlier, with my sponsorship) and his wife, Sharareh, visited me in the new house often with the kids. Parisa and Sina, my niece and nephew, played in the backyard while we barbecued. By all indications, it seemed like they, too, were ready to cross the symbolic bridge.

The house was in the same neighborhood where Charles and his family lived. We got together often. Not long after, my friend and colleague Dianne also bought a house on my street. Around the same time, another transition was happening in my personal life as well. Before leaving Deland, I had met Marylyn when we both participated in an Israel-Palestinian peace movement that met regularly in Orlando. It was coordinated by a Jewish professor at the University of Central Florida and his wife, who was a local social worker. Marylyn was also a partial immigrant, since she was born in the Panama Canal when it was under U.S. control. Her mother, a Panamanian, had married her dad when he was stationed in the U.S. army base there. They had moved to Deltona, an adjacent town to where I lived, a few years earlier. Marylyn had continued living at home while attending college.

When I lived in Florida, Marylyn and I talked frequently before and after the meetings in Orlando and sometimes on campus. Even after I moved to Baton Rouge, we had occasional phone conversations, more so during her search for graduate school. The frequency of these phone calls increased after she was accepted into the master's program at the University of Georgia and moved to Athens. In the year that followed, our relationship became gradually stronger. I drove to Athens a few times to visit. She also visited Baton Rouge once. Upon finishing her master's degree at the University of Georgia, she applied for jobs and eventually accepted a position as a school psychologist in Orlando. A few months after she moved there, we decided to meet halfway in Oxford, Alabama. Over dinner, I asked her if she would marry me. She said yes.

We married in Baton Rouge in the spring of 1995. I brought Cyrus and Mitra from North Carolina for the wedding. The wedding ceremony at the Presbyterian Church of Baton Rouge was simple, with her parents, my brother and sister from North Carolina, and their families, a few colleagues, friends, and their spouses. Marylyn had already applied for and secured a job as a school psychologist in Baton Rouge, starting that summer.

As time went by in the next two years, it gradually became clear that Marylyn was not happy with her job. She was also becoming interested in private practice as a bilingual (Spanish and English speaking) psychologist, rather than working in the school system. To do that, she needed a doctoral degree and other credentials. With my encouragement, she applied to and got accepted into the doctoral program at Texas A&M University. A few months later, we moved her to College Station to start the doctoral program.

We were able to manage the long-distance life over the next three years. Most weekends, one of us drove the 6 hours between Baton Rouge and College Station. Meanwhile, I also drove to Chapel Hill on a regular basis to see the kids. A few times, I brought them to Baton Rouge, especially in the summers or during some holidays when Marylyn was also free to join us.

Living in Baton Rouge during the decade of the 1990s was packed with major changes in my personal life, such as divorce, remarriage, and buying a house. However, the biggest event of the

decade was changing my citizenship, finally crossing the symbolic bridge. That decade also charted my post-immigration professional life: I published two books (one co-authored with Charles) and many journal articles, got tenured, and was promoted to Full Professor at LSU. However, a point of concern remained throughout those years: despite these achievements, my salary had remained substantially below my peers in the same rank and experience within and outside of the institution. To add to this dissatisfying point, the work environment was also deteriorating quickly due to leadership changes and internal conflicts.

On the personal side of life, frustrations and challenges were mounting as we approached the end of the 1990s. Marylyn, who was starting a one-year internship at the Children's Hospital in Albuquerque, New Mexico, was not keen on the prospects of getting a job in Baton Rouge upon finishing her doctorate. Demands for what she liked to do, practicing as a bilingual psychologist, did not seem promising.

As the 20th century was coming to an end, I was increasingly struggling to reconcile all of these positive and negative aspects of life in Baton Rouge. When a new professional opportunity came up for me in early 2000, it didn't take long for me to consider it.

16

The Successful Immigrant

The conference of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) was in New Orleans in April of 2000. I was just beginning to make a name in academia. I was looking forward to special presentations that I had been invited/accepted to make and social events that I was expected to attend. Although most of my writing in Persian had remained unpublished, I had many papers in scientific journals in the U.S. and internationally, as well as two books, one of which was already well known in the social and health sciences. Charles and I had just secured a contract with Sage, a prestigious publisher, for an important Research Methodology Handbook. Finally, I was feeling satisfied with where I was, professionally!

After one of my presentations to a relatively large audience of scholars and students, a smiling, well-dressed attendee approached and introduced herself: "I am the Dean of the College of Education at Florida International University," she declared. After a few pleasantries and references to my presentation, she continued: "I would like to talk to you about a possible collaboration opportunity. Do you have any dinner plans for tomorrow?" I didn't have any plans, and I was curious about the opportunity. So, we agreed to meet at the lobby the next day, at 6 PM.

The hotel restaurant was crowded but not too noisy. Soft jazz music was playing in the background. While we were waiting for dinner, and during it, we talked about family, the conference, and where research methodology was going in the social and health sciences. Sometimes, before we finished eating, she started talking about the main reason for having dinner. She told me about exciting new initiatives at Florida International University in Miami, where she had been recently hired as a dean. She talked about her aspirations for establishing new programs in the college and for strengthening the research standing of the faculty and doctoral students. "I have heard a lot about you and your work, and I would like you to apply for a senior position we just opened," she finally told me.

Flattered, I expressed my appreciation and interest. This was an attractive and exciting professional opportunity. The prospects of a dynamic institution ready and eager to change were very promising. So was the possibility of leadership advancement and a better salary. We talked about the position, the department it was in, and upcoming changes that were already in the works to restructure some programs. "I am honored that you asked me," I told her before we ended. "The position sounds very exciting. I will apply in the next few days." That's exactly what I did when I returned home two days later.

In a week, I received a call from the Search Committee Chair, asking me to go to Miami for a presentation and meeting with the faculty. When my flight arrived on an early afternoon a week later, the Search Committee Chair was waiting for me, introducing himself and taking me to a hotel near the campus.

The next morning, I had very positive meetings with Linda, the dean, as well as the department chair and some of the faculty in the program. My research presentation that afternoon was well attended by a rather large group of faculty and students from across the college. It appeared that they liked the session, ending with engaged discussions and exchanges. In my two days of visit, I met with Linda again, and I had a long meeting with the Provost, who asked a lot of questions about my work in progress and future academic plans. He also asked questions and made comments about my book, *Education of Hispanics in the U.S.,* published almost two years earlier. The rest of my time in Miami was spent in meetings with the search committee, a few other faculty in the college, and students.

I found out during my visit that FIU had more to offer than the possibility of new professional contributions and opportunities. The tropical landscape of the campus reminded me of my childhood hometown, Abadan, full of bougainvillea, hibiscus, and palm trees. The student population was diverse: walking on campus, you could hear different languages, beyond English and Spanish, spoken. Added to that appeal was Marylyn's excitement about the prospects of working and living in Florida after finishing her doctoral education. A month earlier, in June of 2000, we had moved her from Texas to New Mexico for her year of internship in Albuquerque.

When Linda called a week later to offer me the job, I was ready and eager to accept it. The offer came with a substantial jump in my salary. About two months after I signed and returned the written contract, I moved to Florida, renting an apartment in Pembroke Pines, near Miami. By the end of the year, Marylyn had applied for jobs in Miami and the surrounding areas and in Naples, on the West side of South Florida. She was invited to two job interviews, both of which led to job offers, one in Miami and the other in Naples. She called Miami too crazy a place to live in: it was fast, vast, expensive, and chaotic, with crazy traffic. Frustrated, in one of her visits, she declared that she was not going to drive in Miami ever again! The job offer in Naples was more attractive; the cost of living there was less, and the prospects of establishing her private practice in the following years were great. So, she accepted the offer to work as a school psychologist in Collier County, and we decided to call Naples home.

Soon, we put a pre-construction contract on a house in Waterways of Naples, a neighborhood that was being developed northeast of town. We moved Marylyn from New Mexico to a temporary apartment in Naples in the summer of 2001, and to the new house about 6 months later. With the move from my apartment near Miami to the new house in Naples, my daily 120-mile commute to work started as well. Some nights, I stayed in a hotel in Miami.

Naples was a growing beach town on the west shores of Florida, largely white, with a small Spanish-speaking population. On the northeast side of town, close to our house, there were sprawling tomato farms that belonged to major corporations. Most of the workers in these tomato farms were immigrant workers living in the small town of Immokalee. It was a sharp contrast to the city of Naples: poor, with a largely transient immigrant population.

Our new house was a 4-bedroom, one-story building on a small man-made lake. We had a pool in the back, next to the lake, inside a common South Florida screened *lanai* (the screened dome). Ariana was born in the second year that we lived in that house. We had a large backyard, giving me plenty of space to plant trees. For a gardener, that meant being in heaven! In the next two years, I spent every free weekend I had on planting fruit trees and shrubs all over the place. In the next two to three years, we had our own fruits to eat: mango, Persian lime, and Japanese plums, among them.

When Ariana was born, Marylyn quit her school psychology job to take care of the baby. When

the baby grew older, Marylyn started her private practice in Naples. We hired a nanny to take care of the baby when both of us were working. With me not being around most days, life was hectic and difficult (or even sometimes impossible) to maintain. Despite all of that, life was going on relatively smoothly, with normal challenges, such as occasional threats of hurricanes.

Whenever there was such a threat, I had to carry out steel panels that were kept in the garage and bolt them one by one to the metal frame that was installed on the top and bottom of each of the 17 windows. Except in two cases when we had to leave town for a few days, we would hunker down and wait for the storm to pass. For me, getting ready for a hurricane was a day's tiresome job. When finished, the house turned into a huge dark box for days. After each storm threat was gone, all the panels had to be unbolted and taken out one by one and carried to the garage for storage. I hated the entire exercise, lasting a week or more, a few times per year.

Professionally, things were going well. My academic accomplishments, which had started at Louisiana State University, continued at FIU. The Handbook that had taken Charles and me three years to finish was finally published in 2003 and was received very well by the researchers and academicians worldwide. It was being cited in thousands of other scholars' published works. While at FIU, I co-founded a new journal with John Creswell (a well-known scholar in research methodology) for Sage Publications. The journal quickly gained much international recognition, eventually starting to earn a high "Impact Factor," a measure of respect and importance in academia.

Florida International also provided me with numerous other opportunities to continue the growth of my national and international recognition. After a reorganization of the college in my third year of service, Linda asked me to assume the responsibility of being the chair of a newly formed department. I was happy to do so and served in that capacity for the next 3 years. During those years, I also received an important recognition, the Frost Distinguished Professorship.

Life as an administrator was more challenging than before, but it was also rewarding. When a new dean, Luis Miron, was hired for the college upon Linda's retirement, he asked me to become his associate dean for research and grants. This was a promotion for me, and I respected Luis as a progressive scholar and leader. So, I was happy to accept the offer. During the three years that I served in that capacity, I implemented numerous initiatives to strengthen the quality of doctoral dissertations and faculty research.

Sometimes during my third year in that role, the dean of the university's graduate school asked me to meet with him in his office. In that meeting, he told me that he had observed substantial changes in research quality, especially in the quality of dissertations, in my college. "You have a lot to contribute to the entire university," he said. "Why don't you move here as the Associate Dean, beginning in the fall?" This was another promotion for me, and it would give me greater opportunities to contribute. Pleased with the offer, after consulting with Luis, I told him, "I am honored by this, and I would love to work with you." Unfortunately, as I will tell you later, that opportunity never materialized due to major events that happened that year.

Needless to say, I was very pleased with my professional successes, recognition, and contributions both within the university and in the national/international academic community. A lot had changed since my tenure and promotion were denied at Shiraz University more than two decades before. I had migrated to the U.S. right after that, professionally accomplishing much. But, like everything else in life, these accomplishments had a cost that was gradually creeping up. That cost was a deterioration of my health and personal/family life, also starting to negatively impact the quality of interactions at my job. Commuting 120 miles and going back daily was

gradually taking a toll. When I was a regular faculty member, I could be physically away from the university for a few days of the week. In those days when I didn't come to Miami, I used the public library in Naples as my "second office." It was a beautiful and peaceful setting for working, allowing me to be quite productive in writing, preparing for classes, and reading students' work, without interruptions.

When I became a department chair in my third year of service at FIU, I lost the luxury of working off-campus. Now I had to commute more days. Sooner or later, the faculty complained that I was not present in my office every day of the week. Consequently, I purchased a small condominium near Miami and stayed there 4 nights per week. Now my job was easier to handle, but being absent was hard on my family, living 120 miles away. Consequently, when Linda (the dean) retired, I stepped down as a department chair and went back to a regular faculty role. Now I could devote all my attention to working with students and writing and publishing without needing to be on campus all day, five or six days per week.

By the next academic year, we had gone through a search process and hired a new (permanent) dean. Luis was a well-respected scholar in the social sciences himself. Within weeks of starting the new position, he asked me to become his associate dean to lead research and graduate studies. He told me that he knew of my professional reputation and accomplishments, and he had also asked the faculty for suggestions. "The faculty members have suggested you as the best person to take this leadership role," he told me in a meeting. This was an honor and a promotion for me. It would also give me the opportunity to impact the academic culture of the college, one of his goals. So, I accepted. With a staff of 2-3, I didn't have to be in the office every hour of the workweek. I could effectively devote time to reading research proposals and dissertations and continuing my own writing.

Each professional advance of the previous five years had exacerbated the thorny issue of risky driving home, especially in the evenings. The stretch of I-75 known as Alligator Alley is about 80 miles, cutting through the Everglades National Park, with only one gas station midway, at the Indian reservation. Because of accidents between cars and wildlife —such as alligators and panthers—the two sides of the main highway were fenced. The smaller off-roads, however, were not fenced. I drove 20 miles from home on one of these smaller roads to reach I-75 and another 20 or so in Miami after I got off to reach my work.

In my second year at FIU, going home after my evening doctoral class, I ran out of gas on the rural road that went through the Park. I knew that Marylyn could not help, with a small baby at home. I called my neighbor, a young man with whom I had a good relationship. He brought a canister of gas almost two hours later. I sat in the hot car waiting, with windows down in pitch darkness, next to a canal that I was afraid could have alligators in it. I could hear all kinds of wildlife roaming around, especially wild boar, common in that area. When I finally got home at midnight, I found Marylyn in a state of panic. Her anxiety over my commute, especially at night, intensified from that day on. I was concerned about that too, but tried not to show it openly.

These worries reached a climax in 2007, when the next accident happened after I left my Naples home one Sunday afternoon. I was heading to my apartment on the other side so that I could attend an early Monday morning meeting at work. I was driving on the narrow two-lane rural highway that passed through seemingly endless corporate tomato farms on both sides. I saw a huge farm tractor far away moving on the shoulder, going to a farm on the right. The driver was perched high in the cabin on the top of the vehicle. The speed limit was 55. Assuming that the tractor would be well away from the road going to the farm by the time I would pass that site, I

continued driving as usual. Suddenly, without looking, the driver changed his mind, perhaps realizing that he was going to the wrong farm or the wrong side of the intended farm. He entered the road to cross to the opposite side. I slammed on the brakes. Realizing that if I hit the tractor, the driver would be thrown off the top and killed right away, I decided to go off the road to the left shoulder to avoid it, while braking. The driver, who was apparently oblivious to all of this, continued going to the left as well. There were only two choices left in a split second: hit the tractor, which would obviously topple and kill him, or go to the ditch off the road. The dry ditch was the winner, although I was not able to prevent brushing against the huge tire of the tractor for a fraction of a second before I flipped.

In a few seconds that felt like an eternity, I found myself hanging upside down from the seat belt in my shattered Rodeo in the ditch. It is incredible how vivid some memories remain, while others fade in the background. I have forgotten many things about that period of my life, but I remember this incident vividly. I was upside down, trying to free myself from the belt. I knew that the tractor guy was probably not far. I was shouting for him to come and help me, but there was no sign of him. Eventually, I was able to free myself and crawl bloody on pieces of glass through the shattered windshield. The airbag had not been activated. As I was crawling away from the car, I saw the driver standing next to his tractor about 100 feet away, on his cell phone.

Before the police and emergency crew showed up, alerted by a passersby car, a bus came with perhaps 10 farm workers. By the time the sirens could be heard, the bus had left. The man standing by the tractor was not the same man who was driving it before. They switched him! Suddenly, I understood why the previous one did not come to help me. Maybe he was an illegal immigrant or did not have a permit to drive that huge machine on regular roads?

The new man completely denied that there was an accident or that he had anything to do with it. By then, it was getting dark. The policeman told me that there was nothing we could do about the change of driver, since there were no witnesses. Also, since it seemed like there was no accident, he could not find the driver at fault. But, in my total disorientation, I remembered that in the last second of my trying to avoid hitting the tractor, I barely hit his huge tire before ending up in the ditch. And, there it was! The tire, as big as a car itself, had clear signs of a hit under the policeman's flashlight. The driver and the tomato farm company were found at fault, since that huge machine was not even supposed to use the road.

Within days, the insurance company called and offered to pay me the market value of the totaled car. Marylyn insisted that I not buy another SUV. "If you were driving a regular car, you would not end up upside down in a ditch!" she said. I questioned that assumption. Nevertheless, the car that replaced the Rodeo was like a tank: an older full-size Mercedes-Benz.

My car had been destroyed, I had escaped death, and I had all kinds of pains and aches to show for the accident, but I did not sue the company. Without questioning it, I took whatever the insurance company gave me for the totaled car, and used my own health insurance whenever I saw my doctor for my back pain. Later on, I learned how out of line those behaviors were with what others did in case of such a major accident. Another sign of not being fully acculturated after so many years of living in this country. Now I know that I should have asked the insurance company and the tomato conglomerate for compensation, since my neck pain and backache never fully went away, despite all the physical therapy in the next years. Neither did my deformed finger recover.

Commuting to and from work was exhausting, but it didn't break my spirit until this near-death experience. After it, however, life never went back to normal. Aside from Marylyn's (and

my) constant worries, my back and neck hurt in the long drives. Moving the family from the West to the East Coast was not a viable option. They were happy where they were, and Marylyn had a respectable practice in Naples. On the other hand, I was not ready to give up my tenureship and resign from my job to find something to do closer to home. Suddenly, in my personal life, I was facing a seemingly impossible problem. In the context of these intense and stressful events, when a new major economic storm hit the country (and the world), it hit me quite hard. I was not emotionally and financially prepared to face it, and found myself incapable of coping.

That storm was the Big Recession of 2007, leading to the complete disruption of the economy. Soon after it hit, within months, the State cut the budget of the public universities, including mine. As a result, we stopped all searches for new hires that were supposed to replace the faculty or staff members who had left due to retirement or other reasons. In campus meetings, there was talk of dissolving "unproductive" programs and degrees and letting the faculty go, both tenured and untenured. All of a sudden, deep depression fell on the workplace.

When the budget cut ax came down, Luis, the dean who was my immediate supervisor, was asked to identify programs to cut and faculty to let go, and put forward the names of the untenured faculty whose contracts could be terminated. I remember that he and I, and the budget officer of the college, met almost daily in the conference room of the college, in early mornings, depressed and stressed because of the unpleasantness of the task. It didn't take long for Luis to accept an offer to lead a newly formed college in another state. An interim dean, a controversial figure, was appointed, adding to the chaos, tension, and uncertainty that ruled the workspace. The cordial and team-oriented environment of the previous years quickly morphed into conflict and dysfunctionality.

That storm also hit me hard in a personal way: as I mentioned before, a few months before, the dean of the university's Graduate School (who also served as the Vice President of the university) had asked me to move to a newly proposed second associate dean in his unit. I had accepted, and I was getting ready to start at the beginning of the next academic year. When the recession hit, that new position was among the first casualties of the budget cuts. Shortly after, the vice chancellor himself left to become the Provost of a university in another state.

Amid all of the chaos, there were other changes in the workplace. As the associate dean responsible for research, grants, and graduate programs, I was at odds with the interim dean, who was temporarily appointed as my supervisor. Without talking to me, he took away the funding that had been generated from the research grants through my office. Those funds supported a variety of programs aimed at improving the quality and number of doctoral degrees in the College, as well as providing funding for two contractual staff (one a well-known retired methodologist) who helped with dissertations. I didn't have a choice but to fire the two, who had done excellent jobs in the previous three years.

Being depressed, exhausted, and lonely, I hated the work environment and dreaded the long commute to get there. The situation was becoming increasingly untenable. I wasn't fully aware of how much stress existed in my work environment until I took a few days off to drive to North Carolina to visit my family. The long drive back gave me ample time to reflect on work and life. I dreaded going back to what I was doing as an administrator. Eventually, when I asked myself, *Why are you doing this?* I could not find a satisfactory answer. The next day, when I went back to work, I submitted my resignation from the administrative position, and returned to my regular faculty job to continue my teaching, writing, and research.

I had joined the faculty of FIU almost a decade earlier. I had served as a full professor, doctoral

program coordinator, department chair, and associate dean. I had worked hard, done well, enjoyed the support of the university, and had been honored with a Distinguished Professorship that included funds to support my research and writing. In contrast to these positive aspects, my personal and emotional life had not been as successful: I was quite lonely and depressed, and didn't have any close friends. Commuting was certainly a source of stress. Cultural differences, my personality, and being a workaholic added to it. The fact that my home and family were two hours away exacerbated the problem. It was almost impossible to have an after-work family get-together with colleagues. It was equally impossible to make friends in Naples since I was not there most of the time. Although I was relatively close to 1-2 colleagues, our interactions ended the moment we left the workplace.

The Great Recession added to an already stressful workplace and personal life. But it also gave me a strong motivation to seek opportunities elsewhere. I let colleagues know in various universities and research institutions about my desire to seek new job opportunities. Demand for senior professors was not high, but some institutions were seeking administrators, despite the financial challenges. An unexpected phone call from the University of North Texas in the spring of 2008 was a response to my search, opening a new professional direction for me.

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Storms Are Forever!

The Monday morning call from the University of North Texas was unexpected, since I had not submitted an application for a position there. It was the chair of the search committee asking me if I was interested in applying for their department chair position. Apparently, Texas had fared better than Florida, and the university had not faced the kind of budget cuts that we had experienced in Miami. They were looking for somebody to come in and shape a new department that had been formed as a result of the restructuring of the departments within the college. The newly hired dean of the college had strong aspirations for changing the research capabilities of the faculty and strengthening the doctoral degree programs. Apparently, he knew of my work, had heard from a colleague that I was in the market, and had suggested contacting me.

I expressed interest, submitted a letter of application, and was soon notified that I was on the short list. When invited, I went to Denton for a two-day job interview. The two days included a research presentation as well as meetings with faculty, doctoral students, and administrators inside and outside of the college. I was very impressed with the ongoing plans for advancements. I liked Jerry, the dean, and his vision for the department and the college. A week or two later, the dean called to tell me that the faculty had suggested hiring me as their chair. He offered me the job, matching my then-current salary. Marylyn's thriving private practice in Naples was a major obstacle to moving. In further negotiations, the university offered her a 3-year teaching position as well. That would give her time to decide if she wanted to continue as a faculty member in school psychology or start a private practice in Denton.

Before a final decision, I went back to Denton, this time with Marylyn and Ariana, who was 6 years old. Upon returning to Florida, and after many discussions, we accepted the offers and set things in motion for moving. We went to Denton once again for a few days in late May to decide on a school for Ariana. After visiting a few schools and neighborhoods in the area, we decided on Lantana, a new subdivision about 15 miles from Denton. We made an offer on a house there. The purchase went through in June, and we moved to Lantana right before the 4th of July holiday. The movers packed and took almost everything, while we took the leftovers and our two cars.

When we signed the contracts for the jobs, in the midst of the recession, my assumption was that the recession would end, and things would go back to normal in a few months. When we moved to Texas in 2008, the recession was officially declared finished. However, the estimated 8.4 million jobs that had been lost that year and the next did not come back for a long time. The impacts of the recession were even bigger with the burst in the housing market that had an estimated cost of 8 trillion dollars nationally. We had bought a house in Texas, but we have not been able to sell the house in Naples and my condo in Pembroke Pines before we moved.

In the next months, it gradually became evident that I had seriously miscalculated the hidden

consequences of moving. We had our house and related payments in Texas, while we also had bigger monthly association fees, utility bills, and other payments for the properties we had left in Florida. Both had to be maintained from afar: grass needed to be cut weekly and the pool cleaned regularly in Naples; someone had to check on both places regularly, and so on. We had to coordinate the maintenance of properties from far away at high cost. We tried again to short-sell the Florida properties, but the mortgage company did not approve the sales when buyers were found. This dragged on for months, with no end in sight.

Eventually, paying for three properties became untenable. We were getting into debt. Early in 2009, I had lunch with Richard —an old friend from Baton Rouge—who was a lawyer by training and a faculty member at the university. He asked: "Are you happy with your decision to move to North Texas?" I explained the predicament I was in. "You need to talk to a friend of mine who is a bankruptcy lawyer." In the next days, we consulted with the lawyer but were not able to decide what to do. Eventually, I sought a second opinion about possible options. Finally, a year after the move, I was advised to stop paying the two Florida mortgages. Soon after that, we transferred the legal ownership of the two properties to the banks through Chapter 13 bankruptcy. When both were sold by the banks before the end of that summer, all the equity we had in the two properties, including the improvements we had made, was lost. That was a big financial blow for us.

When we finally dealt with all the initial challenges that followed the move, life started to feel peaceful, certainly calmer than in Florida. Denton is a small, peaceful, and slow college town, not very far from Dallas, but quite different from it. Dallas, Denton, and Fort Worth are three points of a triangle that encapsulates much of North Texas. Denton is smaller than the other two points of the triangle. Within the triangle (also known as the Metroplex), there are many small towns, subdivisions, and municipalities, including Lantana, where we lived. The Metroplex provided many advantages of living in a large urban area while living away from all the craziness. In sharp contrast to Florida, on a typical day, I drove only 15 minutes to work, through beautiful farmlands and ranches, with horses and cows grazing on both sides of the road.

As an administrator, my job was hectic but productive and satisfying. I was in charge of a loosely connected set of degree programs that included two doctoral, two master's, and an undergraduate program, as well as a few specialty educational certifications. It took four years to create a cohesive department out of bits and pieces that were put together from four other departments. As the department grew, I coordinated the work of 20 full-time faculty, 3 staff members, as well as a rather large number of adjunct professors and doctoral students who were teaching undergraduate courses. With more than 100 doctoral and close to 1000 master's and undergraduate students, the department was a sharp contrast to what I had started with. Fortunately, I had a good team of faculty, staff, and doctoral students who helped in building and taking care of all of these programs. The results of our collective hard work were becoming more evident with every yearly evaluation by the university.

The first decade of the new century had been loaded with challenges to overcome, including the big recession as well as surviving a deadly accident before it. In contrast, the second decade started with a period of relative calm for me and my family. I am sure that you, the reader, have experienced what I am going to tell you next: that sometimes peaceful times in life feel like being in the eye of a moving storm, knowing that the turbulence will arrive sooner or later! That second decade of the century, overall, was full of such calms and subsequent turbulent times. One such turbulence occurred when I encountered death again, for a second time.

It was a usual Friday at the end of the spring of 2013, a calm and uneventful workday on which

I was hopeful to catch up with a few office miscellanea. I was also in the middle of arranging two professional trips in the next few months, one in July and the other in August. The July trip was to attend Week 2 of the Chair Academy leadership training in Banff. I had attended the Week 1 training in the previous summer. I was also making arrangements to attend the Annual Meetings of the American Psychological Association in Hawaii. Everything looked great, both at work and in my personal life.

When the phone rang, I answered with my usual greeting: "Tashakkori, how may I help you?" The woman on the other side introduced herself, "I am Dawn from Dr. Johnson's office." "Do you have a few minutes to talk about your test results?" Three weeks before, I had gone to a dermatologist because I had some growth behind my right ear that itched all the time and would not go away. The dermatologist's office had sent a biopsy sample to a lab. About a week later. I found another lump, this time behind the other ear. A second biopsy sample was also sent out for testing. This Friday, Dawn was calling about the test results. She sounded sad. In a low tone, she apologized for the test results taking so long. "We got the results more than a week ago and sent them for a second opinion to a university lab," she commented. "We questioned the first results, so we also asked a different clinic with better experience to advise. The diagnosis is confirmed. Both spots are Follicular B-Cell Lymphoma."

Not knowing what the Follicular B-Cell was, I asked for more information, closing my office door. She patiently explained that it was "a slow-growing cancer." I don't remember much of the rest of the conversations. Something about the possibility of transfer from one side of the body to another and the need to see an oncologist ASAP. "I have already contacted your primary care physician," she said. I was amazed at how much she cared and how much time and effort she had devoted to this. Sounded very sad, like she was in tears.

"Thank you for being so caring!" I remember saying. Hung up and sat for a long time. About an hour later, my cell phone rang; it was my primary care physician. "Hi Abbas! He said. " We got your test results back, and I want you to see Dr. Smith as soon as you can. My staff will call you shortly with an appointment. She is working on it!" He told me more about B-Cell Lymphoma. The fact that it seemed to have transferred from one side to the other side of the neck was disconcerting. "Chemotherapy will take care of it after the oncologist determines the stage," he said.

The phone rang again shortly after. This time it was the scheduler giving me all the information about the oncologist, address, appointment time, and so on. "I have contacted the insurance company and taken care of referrals. You're all set." "You also have a nurse-navigator to help you through this process." She gave me the navigator's name and number to call, which I did right away. The navigator gave me more information about the process of staging the cancer and possible treatments.

I am numb! So much was pouring in within two hours! The office door remained closed —an unusual thing for me. Sitting silently at my desk, a thousand questions raced through my head:

What the heck should I do now?,

What happens to my family if I don't survive?

What happens to my department and work if I have to go through chemotherapy? Overwhelmed, I decided to leave the office after a while. On my way down, I stopped in the dean's office. "Have a few minutes?" I guess the look on my face said it all. This was an emergency! "Oh yes, come in," Jerry said while he closed the door. "What's wrong, Abbas?" I told him about the phone calls and the news. Told him that they are telling me that I might have to go through chemotherapy. "If

confirmed, I might not be able to come to work for weeks or months," I said. He told me not to worry. "Mike will take over for as long as you need to take care of yourself," he said! "Take three months, seek treatment, rest, get well, and return!" I left after gratefully telling him that I would ask for help as needed.

A week later, I met with the oncologist in his office, located in a large building that housed a large cancer treatment group. He told me that he staged my cancer at IV. The fact that there were two growth locations, on opposite sides of the body, meant that the cancer had spread. So, he decided that full chemotherapy was necessary, 5 days per week for four (or six?) weeks. Responding to my question about survival rate, he told me that it ranged between 6 months and a few years, with a median of two (or maybe he said three. All sounded the same to me at that point).

I returned to campus and walked around aimlessly under the shade of the trees, trying to decide what to do next. Eventually, I decided to go to Jerry's office and talk to him. He asked me, "How is Marylyn coping with all of this?" I remember the shocked look on his face when I told him that she did not know about it yet. "Abbas, you must go home and tell her now!" he advised. Later that day, I followed his advice. I remember it was a day before Marylyn's birthday. *What a birthday present!*

I told her, in some detail. She cried. "What am I going to do without you if anything happens?" That night, I also told my sister and my son. In a day, everyone knew. Emails and phone calls poured in from my family with expressions of encouragement and promises of support.

Later that week, I met with the oncologist, this time with Marylyn and the Nurse-Navigator. Marylyn asked, "Do we need a second opinion?" "No, this is very cut and dry," he said confidently. "Tests are unambiguous." He told us that before starting chemotherapy, he needed to do a bone-marrow test to see if the cancer had spread deep or not. I went through that procedure in the next few days. I will never forget the sound of him tapping on my backbone, chiseling to extract a piece, under local anesthesia.

That week, I also met with the financial adviser of my retirement account at Fidelity Investments in his Southlake office. After sharing the news, I told him. "I am worried about my family's finances." He brought in another colleague, and we sat down and went through different strategies and options. Finally, I filled out the paperwork to consolidate and move my retirement accounts from previous employers to Fidelity. They set up a managed account so that they could take care of my bills if I became very sick, or worse.

Two days later, I attended the chemo preparation class that the oncologist's office had scheduled. About 10 or 12 people, some being patients and others family members, attended that session on the first floor of the clinic building. The instructor was a bubbly middle-aged woman who went through a colorful 3-ring binder that we had all received, discussing it section by section: What to expect, what to do, what not to do. "Can't change the fish tank water after you start," she said, and laughed uncomfortably. "No raw vegetables, unless you wash them in a special liquid that disinfects them." Alerts and precautions went on for a while. Scared, I am thinking about how hard life is going to get from now on.

They gave me a 3-ring, professionally made binder that included a chapter for each of the three chemicals they were going to pump into my body to kill the cancer cells, and everything else with it. All the side effects of the "cocktail" were listed along with tips about how to cope with them. After the session, I was given a tour of the facilities. Severe panic took over me when I saw people sitting in chairs in front of TV sets, each connected to a tube hanging from a stand: it

reminded me of the movie with human bodies in suspended animation waiting for organ harvesting (what movie was it?). I knew the fear was not rational, but I wasn't able to stop the panic attack!

Early the next day, I met with the surgeon who was going to install a valve in my chest for chemo. He scheduled my surgery for the next day. Zahra, my sister, called later that morning: "I am concerned about you not getting a second opinion," she declared. The oldest sister, a nurse practitioner herself, did not hesitate to order me to stop the process. "I do not trust the motives of these doctors." "They make too much money on chemo. There is a big conflict of interest here," she said. "We need a second and third opinion."

I called the Navigator to consult about postponing the surgery. She told me that she would take care of it and also get an appointment with another oncologist right away. The Nurse navigator was able to get a quick appointment with a second oncologist, Dr. Saez, whom she knew well. When I met with Dr. Saez, he told me about consulting with another specialist, Dr. Jones, a radiation oncologist in the same building. He also told me that Dr. Jones had sent the test results to his old medical school professor. "Dr. Lymphoma" (Dr. Jones's nickname for his professor) had made a different cancer diagnosis: "It is a rare type of cancer that may appear anywhere on the skin," he had said. "The fact that you have it on both sides of your neck is just a coincidence," Dr. Saez told me. "Dr. Jones and I have talked about a treatment strategy. For now, he will do radiation for 6 weeks," he said. "If we see evidence of it coming back, we will do minor chemo as a backup. Regardless, no major chemo needed. You'd be fine!"

Similar to what I had told my previous oncologist, I told Dr. Saez that I might need a letter from him to cancel my airplane tickets for the two professional trips in July and August. He promised a letter in a day or two for the July trip. But, for the Hawaii conference, he told me that it was "not necessary to cancel at all." "You will be fine by then," he said. Then he spent some time talking about the need for me to take some time off and recoup. "Why don't you take your family with you and stay a little longer?" "If you need a letter for that, let me know," he said.

His letter helped me cancel the reservations that I had made for the trip to Banff for my leadership training. During the last two weeks of June and the entire month of July, I had radiation treatment every day of the working week. Stubbornly, I refused to take any time off work, even though Jerry, my supervisor, suggested it. I left my work each afternoon around 3 PM, drove 40 minutes to Plano for radiation treatment, and returned home afterwards.

I traveled to Honolulu with Marylyn and Ariana two weeks after my radiation treatment ended. When the APA convention was over, we flew to Hilo, the island that claims to be "the orchid capital of the world." We stayed in a vacation rental for a week and drove to various parts of the island. The panic of incapacitating chemotherapy —and the doomsday prediction of living 6 months to a few years—was gradually dissipating from my mind. I was keenly aware that being able to spend time with family, breathing the tropical air, and listening to the waves were all new privileges that I could have lost.

I had escaped death twice in the past two decades. The car accident in Florida had left me alive, albeit with aches and pains. Although there was a possibility of its return (as it did 9 years later), the cancer of 2013 proved much less life-threatening than the initial diagnosis had suggested. It was as if with each incident, I had been given a new gift of living. I tried to appreciate that gift for the next few years as much as I could. Unfortunately, as I got engulfed in the stresses of daily living and work, I started forgetting about these gifts, not realizing that another menacing storm was on the horizon, most probably as a result of that oversight.

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View From The Summit

it was early afternoon on a Friday, during the Fall semester of 2018, and I was sitting in my office, highly stressed out. Everything that could go wrong had gone wrong that week. Every problem was suddenly entangled with other problems at work: Faculty, students, technology, and budget. I was not feeling that good, having stomach pain that felt like indigestion. Alecia, my Office Manager, came in to talk about something, but suddenly stopped midway inside my office. "Are you okay? You look terrible!" she said (days later, she told me that I was "white as a ghost"). When I responded uncertainly, that I thought I was alright, she was visibly not convinced: "No way, Jose!" she responded. "We've got to get you to an emergency room." After a few minutes of thinking, I agreed to go with her to the emergency room nearby. "Yes, grandma!" I said, when she explained that we "better be safe than sorry." We left without alarming the other people in the office.

The drive to the emergency room was short. In the car, trying to handle the fast-increasing pain in my chest, I made a joke about the situation, and we laughed. However, as soon as she stopped at the curb at the emergency room, I sprinted out and went in. Putting my head against the glass divider, I told the nurse on the other side, "I am in great pain," pointing to my chest. The nurse jumped from her seat and shouted something. A minute later, I was inside on a bed, with a nurse on the side getting an EKG machine ready. Another nurse came shortly after and put an IV in my wrist. By then, the pain was becoming unbearable. Alecia stayed in the room, despite my insistence for her to go back to the office. Eventually, after waiting for a few test results, they gave me something that reduced the pain. The shaking, which had started minutes earlier, finally stopped. What a relief!

Later that afternoon, I was moved from the emergency room to the cardiac unit of the main hospital. By then, Marylyn had arrived, and Alecia finally agreed to go home. We were told that I needed surgery as soon as the Cardiologist could do it. They had scheduled it for 9 AM in the morning. But the surgery room and the cardiologist did not become available until 2 PM. I remember the transfer from the room to the surgery unit, but nothing else after. I woke up an hour later and was taken back to my room. I was a proud owner of a stent in my heart! When the cardiologist came to visit me afterwards, he said: "You are a lucky man. You survived a widow-maker. If you hadn't come in on time, you'd probably be dead now." So it was that my third encounter with death happened, and I miraculously survived, thanks to Alecia's foresight. Beyond her, there must be someone up in the sky looking after me!

When I returned home from the hospital a day later, I had been told not to climb any stairs. However, the bedrooms in the house were upstairs, leaving me no choice. I had worried about this problem once before, when I was getting ready for extensive chemotherapy for my cancer five

years earlier. After I recovered from my heart attack, the worry continued: I was afraid that a second heart attack might happen, sooner or later, just like what happened to my father, who had a second heart attack a year after the first, before he was 65 years old. Eventually, in response to these worries, in the Spring of 2019, we bought and moved into a house that had all bedrooms downstairs.

Up to that point in time, the elusive peace had survived this recent crisis and everything else that had happened since we moved to Texas. But as the decade was coming to an end, changes in the working environment started to erode that. I had to deal with difficult personnel issues that were impacting an entire group of students. There were multiple leadership changes at the university level and in my college. Things started to deteriorate further after Jerry (the dean who had hired me) retired and left. A few months later, I had to handle a long process involving one faculty member's harassment accusations against another. The accusations were eventually dismissed. However, I was also accused of not taking action when I was told of the individual's concerns. The records, however, were clear: I had emailed my interim supervisor right away that day, telling her that the accusing faculty had asked me not to notify the university until she explicitly notified me. So, although the complaint against me was ruled out, I was reprimanded by the university for honoring that request.

Coping with these crises took much time and energy, as well as a heavy emotional toll on me and others at work. I became so burned out that I decided to step down, despite my outside legal counsel's advice against it. Returning to my regular faculty teaching and research activities restored the shattered peace to some extent. Life slowed down drastically, giving me freedom to spend time with family, as well as collaborating on projects with colleagues and students. I also had more time to devote to writing the second edition of my textbook (with Burke Johnson and Charles Teddlie). It took more than a year to finish that project. The book was published in 2020. Its arrival was a bittersweet moment, since it coincided with one of the biggest human crises of all time, the pandemic.

Like millions of others across the planet, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, life and work came to a standstill for millions, turning my life upside down too. Before it, I had faced a major life crisis almost every decade of my life, and had found a way to cope with each. So, I told myself: *This too shall pass*, as Rumi —or maybe another wise Persian Sufi, Attar— had told us centuries ago.

During my professional life, one of the main things that I look forward to every day had been my membership in professional communities, working with colleagues and advisees, and the day-to-day interactions with students in classes. When the pandemic hit, I tried to cope with it by wearing masks in classes that were held in large spaces that allowed six feet of space between students. Teaching was a challenge during the Fall of 2020, since at any given time, several students had to stay home because they had been exposed to the virus. Still, both the students and I worked hard, and we finished the semester almost unscathed.

As things got worse, the university was forced to close down, like everything else in town. I wasn't even allowed to go to my office to water my plants (I found them all dead, later, when I was allowed to go in). For months, I was confined to the house with no place to go, not even the library or a coffee shop. When classes began the next semester, they were all online. I was able to cope with the technical skills and tools that I needed for teaching online, but I was not happy with teaching that way. I missed the face-to-face human interactions of my previous years. Whenever I had to go to my office to pick up a book or file, there was no sign of life on campus: the entire three-story building was dark when I entered, with some automatic lights turning on as I

unlocked the main door to enter the stairways and hallways while I walked up to my office.

As months passed by, it became evident that this crisis was not going to pass anytime soon. Making it worse, I was feeling that my ability to cope with it was dissipating by the day. Work was not the same as before. I became keenly aware that my job was a lonely and impersonal set of tasks, totally inconsistent with how it had been during the past few decades. It felt like I was working in a different world. Eventually, I asked the ever-existential question that I had also asked in previous slumps in my life: *Why are you doing this?* The answers were not satisfying at all. Being paid was not enough to justify the pain. It was time to get out! I retired before the Fall semester of 2021 started.

Retirement allowed me to slow down and look at the world through a different lens. Being a successful professional, especially as an immigrant, had required a lot of hard work and many personal sacrifices. Retirement gave me the time to do some of the things that I wanted to do but never had the luxury of doing. As the threat of COVID eased in the following year, I started volunteering in a soup kitchen (Our Daily Bread) as well as in the Denton County Medical Reserve Corps, helping in their mass vaccination projects. I also started to attend classes to learn Tai Chi, drawing, and watercolor painting. Perhaps more importantly, I started working on the first edition of this book, publishing it in 2024.

As I am making revisions for this edition of the book near the end of 2025, I feel like a time traveler who has stopped to catch his breath at a half-century stop. It was the late 1960s when I started my professional/academic life as an undergraduate research worker in Shiraz, leading to becoming a doctoral student at the University of North Carolina in 1975. It took more than half a century of relentless efforts to go from that to becoming a Distinguished Professor and a recognized scholar with more than 75,000 references to my works by other scholars across the world (based on Google Scholar, as of October 2025). Professionally and in my personal life, I have plenty to be grateful for, not only for my accomplishments, but more importantly for all the opportunities to contribute to the lives of others.

I feel like I have reached a summit. The journey has been volatile, exciting, and challenging. The route went through so many changes and challenges, innovations, wars, crises, and disasters. The change is continuing, and even accelerating, making it even more difficult for my generation to adapt. It is frightening to see that humanity is facing even larger-scale and more serious threats than what I saw on my path: the Ukraine war, genocide in Gaza, escalating disasters related to climate change, the mistreatment of immigrants in the U.S., and many others.

A a "successful immigrant," my professional ascent has occurred in the bigger context of a life journey that has been full of challenges, excitements, frustrations, and satisfying accomplishments. Reflecting about it, at this juncture in time, it feels like I have been climbing the rocky mountains that I used to climb with my childhood/adolescence group of 12 in Jahrom, again. At that time, in the 1960s, upon reaching the peak of the mountain at midday, all we could see on the other side were hilltops and other faraway mountains, clearly visible. Standing at the summit of my time-travel today, the world that I see ahead is not so clear. It is quite foggy and somewhat frightening. However, what is behind me is mostly clear and somewhat comforting, despite some regrets. It feels good to be on the summit, even though I find the future even scarier than ever before.

I must confess that reaching the summit of my time travel is a bittersweet experience. As the reader of this book, you have traveled with me through many moments of joy, pride, and despair. I am grateful for that, and I hope that you have found it enriching. I also owe it to you to answer a

few fundamental questions that might have emerged during that travel. Perhaps the most important one among them, you might ask: “What lessons did you learn in your travels through time and space?” I will try to respond by asking and answering a few related questions in the final chapter of this book.

19

Lessons of a Lifetime

I've looked at life from both sides now
From win and lose, and still somehow
It's life's illusions I recall
I really don't know life at all
(*Both Sides Now*, an old song by Judy Collins)

Here I am, traveling on a path that the wheel[11] weaved the way it wanted to (yes, I am also a fan of Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time*!). Destined or not, there is one certainty in the way the story of my life has turned out: I did cross the metaphoric bridge of my childhood nightmares that symbolized the fear and guilt of transitioning to the other side. Were the dreams simple coincidences, expressions of hopes and desires that motivated me for the next decades of life, or were they foretelling? Whatever the interpretation, if I was meant to live in poverty, in a rather simple and predictable world, that is not how my life played out. Destiny or not, my world is very different from what it could have been. I have accomplished much and contributed a lot. I am grateful for all of that.

As you have witnessed while travelling with me, nothing has been simple throughout the journey. From a distant past in which I was an impoverished child of parents who never went to school themselves, I have journeyed to become a full professor and administrator in prestigious universities, a competent researcher, and a well-recognized academic writer. I have effectively contributed to the world by educating many professionals. I can't tell you how many Master's and Ph.D's. I have trained during more than 30 years of teaching in graduate schools in the U.S. alone (I know of a few who have served as bureau directors in state and local education agencies, or worked as statisticians, university administrators, and faculty members, especially in Louisiana, Florida, and Texas). By the standards of academia and the scientific community, I have been considered successful by my peers, nationally and internationally, with something to say that was deemed worth listening to.

Looking back, I see that life has been full of challenges, each presenting its own opportunities and costs proportionate to the scale of the challenge. A lesson I learned was that the bigger challenges extracted bigger costs. In my mind, immigration provided the biggest opportunities for me and my family, but also exacted the biggest costs. I will talk about these costs/tolls shortly.

I have tried many times to answer a fundamental question about each of the major jumps (migration and immigration) in my life: *Was it worth it? Was taking all the risks worth it?* My immigration to the U.S. and the subsequent moves have resulted in productive and satisfying professional growth. On top of all of that, it became a model, if not an impetus, for my siblings,

almost all living successfully in the US or scattered around the globe at this time. Certainly, it provided opportunities for my children to pursue and succeed, each becoming a successful professional. So, when it comes to immigration, my answer is clear: Yes, it was worth it!

Despite the clarity of that answer, there is a nagging voice in the back of my mind, reminding me of the emotional costs of the journey and the related professional accomplishments. From one point of view, any cost would be justifiable for getting where I am now. In a conversation with my brother Rahman (who served as the chairperson of the Computer Science Department at Appalachian State University until recently), I mentioned that neither of us was supposed to be here. The same is perhaps true of my other siblings and our children. Nevertheless, we ARE here. At some level, we all have defied the odds. Whatever the costs have been, they are well justified.

On the other hand, from another point of view, the answer to the question gets entangled in the concepts of integration and belonging, cultural differences, and so on. My life has been a long journey in time and in space to faraway places. Looking back, and at the destination as it is today, there is one realization that sometimes overshadows all the personal and professional accomplishments. The fear and anxiety that dominated my early nightmares have stubbornly persisted along the journey: fear of getting lost, not fitting in, and not belonging in the world on the other side of each of the crossed bridges. It is amazing how one can sometimes feel like an outsider detached from a culture (a world?) while knowing that he has been, and is, an integral part of it, integrated or not. Perhaps this is a paradox that many, if not all, immigrants face. If so, I am sure that each tries to find a resolution differently, one way or another.

Across the years, I have read about aggression, microaggression, and even violence against immigrants, including Iranian-Americans, in communities across the U.S. As I write this, in 2025, such incidents have drastically increased. Although rare in the past, I have seen some evidence of this around me, wherever I lived. However, I have not personally faced many overt negative reactions to my background and accent. Yes, I may have conveniently ignored them. Alternatively, it is also possible that spending most of my working life within and around universities has helped. People's reactions to me have often been kind and respectful. There have been rare exceptions to this. Regrettably, more than once in my yearly evaluations by the faculty as a Department Chair, I have had statements like "*He should return to where he came from.*" Its rarity has enabled me to overlook it. Similar negative reactions by students have also been rare, although they increased substantially during Trump's first presidency. To sum it all up, I don't think my feelings of being an outsider have much to do with deliberate attempts by others to exclude me.

Nayeri wrote in *The Ungrateful Refugee* that we are all immigrants from the past. It is true, at least about those immigrants who are decades old (i.e., double-immigrants, both in time and in geography). We all arrive at every present moment with backpacks full of memories from the past, distant or not. One's symbolic backpack gets heavier each year until the memories start falling from it. I have arrived at my present time with such fading memories of distant events that are long gone, maybe even forgotten by everyone. For some of these memories, the places that they are connected to are gone as well, or perhaps never existed the way I remember them. One lesson I have learned during the journey is that the further away we get from our geographic and cultural origins, the stronger our longing gets for them, and the stronger our urge becomes to reconstruct them. Perhaps these are attempts to cope with the fading memories, to keep them alive?

Paradoxically, the reality of life for many immigrants, including me, is that we long for and at

the same time dislike that remembered world. I have talked to many immigrants in the past few years. The longing for that reconstructed world is always in their voices, in their dreams, and under their breaths. They always keep a piece of that cherished place with them, in the form of artifacts, some from the past and some reminders of the place as it is today. You see these on their walls, on top of coffee tables, and in pictures and stories they share.

I have also found out that there is guilt hidden under these emotions of many immigrants. It is the guilt of abandoning, forgetting, not sharing the pain of those left behind, not being there to help when needed, and not contributing to the everyday joys of those left behind. I have learned that different people cope with that guilt in different ways. I am certainly no exception. Perhaps my confessions here help others like me, knowing that they are not alone in these feelings.

The question that I asked previously about the emotional costs of immigration leads to another, even more basic, one that I also suspect most immigrants ask, in one form or another: "Where do you belong between the worlds that you have lived in?" A simple and cliché answer could be "To all of them." The realist (perhaps the pessimist) in me gives a more complex answer to the question, a social-psychological one that I have experienced myself: "You do not fully belong to either[12]." Prominent masters of Persian literature such as Hedayat, Naraghi, and Jamalzadeh have talked about this type of alienation as *Ghorbate-e-Gharb* (Estrangement in the West).

The hard truth is that moving from Iran to the U.S. meant leaving my old world behind without fully gaining a new one —a struggle that many migrants share. As I grew older, I realized more and more that I never overcame the shock of changing my citizenship, language, and lifestyle all at the same time, and abruptly leaving everyone and everything behind. Is that why many older immigrants decide to return "home" when they retire? I have read about this in other people's writings and research papers. Some scholars have talked about the "myth of return" –denoting immigrants' belief that their move is temporary, and they will go back someday[13]. In some of the research reports that I have read, the extreme case of this is demonstrated in the desire to be buried at home: "Take my body back home," as a few qualitative studies, mostly done in Europe, have suggested. Strangely, this reminds me of the myth about elephants going back home to die.

Maybe it is time, before I end this book, to ask a final question about what made my success, however modest it has been, possible: "What made all of this possible?" Certainly, despite the emotional tolls, immigration has been a decidedly important factor. But what made the immigration itself possible and successful? I owe it all to my family's support and encouragement, education, willingness to take risks, relentless hard work, and the kindness of strangers. The first four are probably self-evident by now, even clichés that everyone knows about and rarely questions (what is called 'truism' in social psychology). The last one, however, might not be so obvious.

During my journey, the kindness of strangers and mentors has always been an enabling factor. I have shared a few examples with you throughout the book, from my 5th-grade teacher to my college mentors in Iran, my doctoral advisors, post-doctoral colleagues, and many others whom I met on this side of the river before and after I officially became an immigrant. I wouldn't be where I am in life without their help. They, and many others, believed in me, took an interest, encouraged me, and helped me overcome obstacles. I can write a whole book on all the acts of kindness by the strangers and not-so-strangers in my life, each shifting my life's trajectory, by a little or sometimes by a lot. I hope that by the time I die, I have paid forward some of these acts of kindness. The fact that there were so many people like that, and there are many today, makes me

hopeful about the current state of humanity.

I have learned that sometimes we are like lost sailors seeing a faraway flickering lighthouse in the fog, giving us a beacon of hope that there are others out there: others who care. I have been fortunate to find that light many times in my life, from mentors and strangers, and have strived to be that light for others. I hope that this final observation gives you comfort in seeking that light, and also inspires you to shine for others at this time of upheaval, inequality, and uncertainty.

Notes

Preface

1 The song's name may be roughly translated as "Really [or come on!], what do you expect?" (*AAkhe' che entezari daary?)*. Maryam RoohParvar, the singer, was once an icon of Persian folk music in the early 1960's. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=82Bc9Nhnqy8

2 The verbatim translation is "a stream or a spring, facing a sea."

River of Life

3 Interestingly, he is the rural elementary school teacher mentioned in Soleimani's memoir as the teacher who inspired him. Soleimani was a commander in the Iranian Revolutionary Guards who was killed via a drone attack by the U.S. After Soleimani's death in 2020, Uncle Reza was interviewed in a TV documentary because he was named by Soleimani for his influence on him as a teacher.

My Dream City

4 For more details of that event and its aftermath lasting decades, please see Part 1 of the PBS documentary *American Experience: Taken Hostage* that was aired in 2022.

Anticipation

5 In Freudian psychoanalytic theory, boys go through a stage in which they fall in love with their mothers and develop a sense of rivalry with their fathers (i.e., the Oedipus Complex). In Homer's work, from which the mythology came, Oedipus, the son, eventually kills his father. In Persian mythology the reverse happens: Rostam, the father kills his son Sohrab. What would Freud conjure out of that if he knew?

Adaptation

6 Photograph by Trikosko, Marion S. Image retrieved from the United States Library of Congress digital ID ppmsca.09800

7 There is a PBS documentary "taken Hostage" effectively depicts this: Https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/taken-hostage/

8 I thought it is historically important to include this picture as a summary of sentiments of the times, unfortunately, I have not been able to find the source of where I first saw this 1979 picture. Weeks of my research to find the source have been unsuccessful. I apologize for my failure to find the source to give due credit here. I will be grateful if anyone can help.

A New Dawn

9 I can't help but notice some alarming current parallels in the U.S. Universities are under pressure to fire the faculty members who have taken the liberty of speaking the truth, in one form or another. What happened at Texas A&M University in September 2025 is but one example. In that instance, a conservative student recorded a professor's comments about gender identity in classes. There were calls by prominent figures in the state to fire the professor. However, rather than complying with these political pressures, the university's president himself resigned (see: https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/sep/19/texas-am-university-president-resigns).

10 *Parandeh baaz nagardad magar zamni ke ...*
A bittersweet moment was seeing my students again, almost two decades later, when I traveled to Iran for two weeks to visit my family. They had found out via Dr. Mehryar (my old mentor and colleague) about my arrival. They were waiting in Tehran airport with a bouquet and a kind note that said, "Please return."

[11] What in Persian literature, including Khayyam's poems, is known as *Charkh-e-Falak*, the wheel of the universe or fate.

[12] Adaptation to the old culture might be more difficult than what the returned immigrants envision. Authors have written about their struggles to fit in the new culture, as well as in the old culture when they return. For example, in her memoir, *Lipstick Jihad,* Azade Moaveni writes about "growing up Iranian in America and American in Iran." Nature of the difficulty in 'fitting' while going back and forth between the old and the new cultures might be different between older immigrants and those who were young when immigrated.

[13] A quick search of the term "Myth of Return" (coined by the British sociologist Mohammad Anwar, 1979) on the web will demonstrate the complexity of this phenomenon among immigrants. There is an extensive body of books and essays about the contradictory attributes of this "return fantasy," it's impact on the mental health of the immigrants, and their (often) unsuccessful ways of coping with it.